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Hawk in the Wind

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by

Helen Topping Miller

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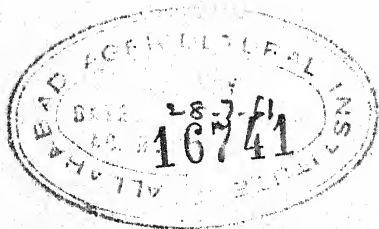
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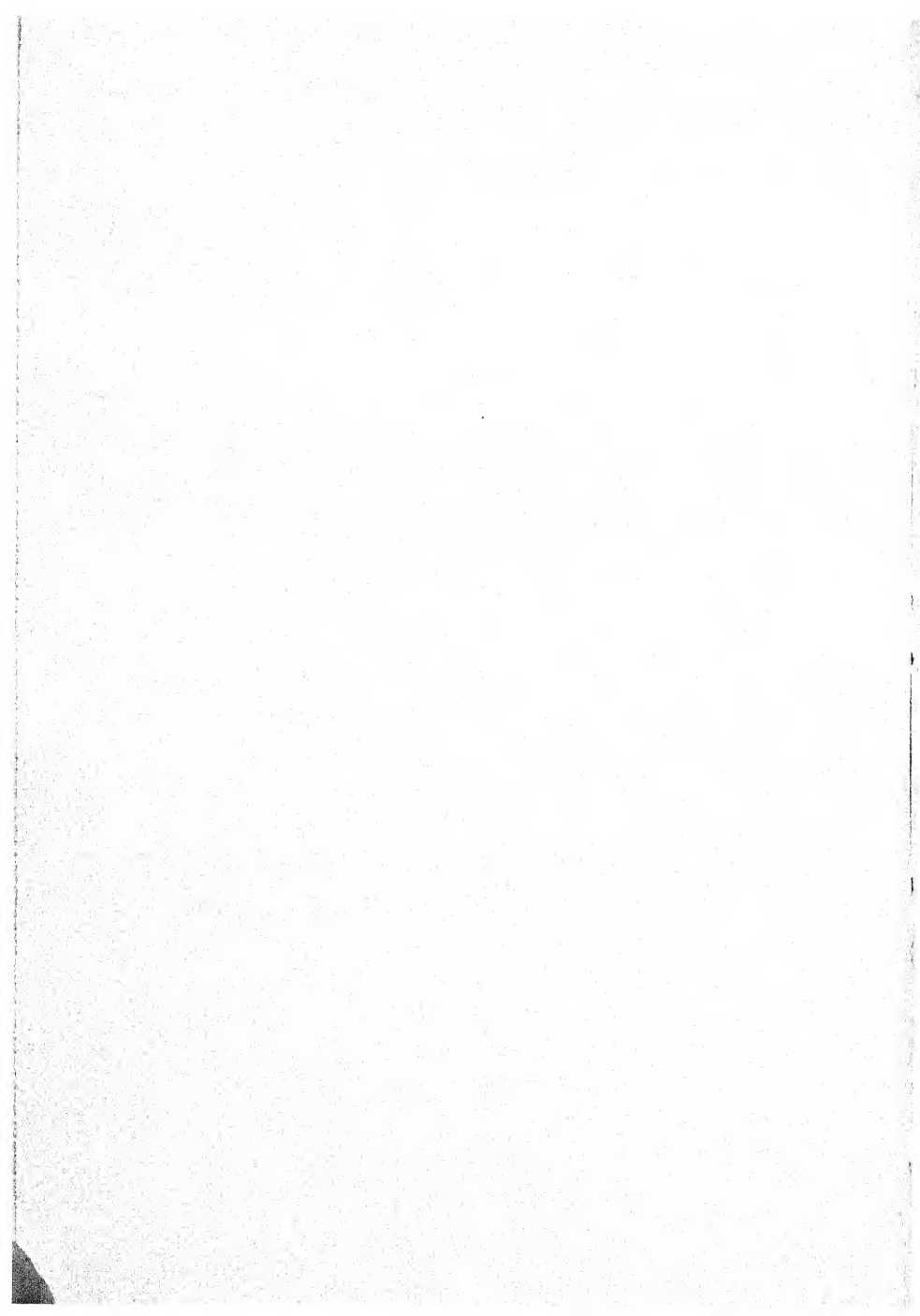


PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To
BOB

*For courage and gallantry
in a bitter fight against
an invisible enemy*





I

VIRGIE MORGAN shut the front door of her house, locked it, chained it, leaned against it, her knees fluid, her heart pounding.

"The old fool!" She choked with fury. "The addle-headed, pathetic, impudent old fool!"

Hot red surged into her strong, shrewd face. Then it ebbed a little. She pushed back a gray wave of hair with a gesture naïve and disturbed. She was fifty-two. A tall, strong woman with power in every inch of her tallness, in the wide decisive gentleness of her mouth, in her steady gray eyes, her proud nose which dominated her features without dwarfing them.

Her feet sat solidly on the polished floor; her clothes, well-made and not cheap, fitted her muscular body, forsaking style for utility. Her chest was deep and her thighs sturdy, but with all this anchored stability she was now one quivering tumult of outraged nerves.

A man had asked her to marry him and in sudden wrath, half shame and half consternation, she had put him out of her house. Now she could hear his car roaring around her drive, swerving past the rhododendrons and the tall stone posts, gathering speed as it swooped into the descending road.

Wallace Withers, whom she had known all her

life—going home in a rage because she had slammed her door upon him.

Pulling herself together with some difficulty Virgie went to the mirror, straightened her collar, looked herself coldly up and down.

An iron-colored woman, with a purposeful face softened by lines of laughter around eyes and mouth, hands too large, shoulders too masterful. She frowned at herself.

"You're a tactful thing now, Virgie Morgan! You're a diplomat, I must say. Flying all to pieces over an old fool like Wallace Withers!"

Her feet wavering slightly, her head spinning, she stumbled into her library, which she still stubbornly called the "sitting-room." A log fire burned there; there were books in autumnal colors along two walls and, over the stone mantel, an enlarged photograph of a middle-aged man with an alert, nervous face, black hair, and cool, calculating blue eyes.

Virgie looked up at this portrait, swallowed grimly and achingly, tightened her cold hands into fists.

"You missed a lot, David," she said aloud. "I reckon it's just as well."

A door at the far end of the room moved slightly. Virgie scowled at it.

"Come along in, Lossie," she snapped. "If you want to listen, come in where you won't miss anything!"

A girl with a dull face and brassy hair waved stiffly slid into the room.

"I heard you talkin'— I thought maybe you was callin' me?"

"You heard me all right." Virgie was grim. "I suppose you heard Mr. Withers, too? Listen to me, Lossie Wilson—if you drop a word around Marian, you're fired—you hear me?"

"Yes'm. I wouldn't say anything for nothing, Mis' Morgan. I didn't hear real good, anyhow. You want anything, Mis' Morgan?"

"Yes. Heat up the coffee-pot. You haven't washed it, I know. Bring me a cup of coffee—strong—and no sugar. Is Marian in yet?"

"No'm, she ain't yet. She went to the second show, maybe."

Virgie wandered to the window uneasily. "It's starting to sleet again. She's got no business driving that car up this mountain in a storm."

"Yes'm—but she will though. It ain't any use saying anything to her. You want cream in your coffee, Mis' Morgan?"

"No—no cream. But put some coffee in it, for Lord's sake. A pale blue peacock would have gagged at that weak stuff I got for supper. And bring some more wood. I'm going to sit up a while."

"Yes'm." Lossie slid through the swinging door, then put her head back to inquire. "He didn't think you'd go over there and live in that terrible old house, I hope? Old oil lamps and not even a well! Mis' Withers had to fetch water from the spring till the day she died."

"Lossie, you tend to your own business!"

"Yes'm. But it sure is a terrible lonesome place to live. Nothing to see but mountains and a graveyard—and that old river."

The coffee was hot and black and, warmed by it, Virgie Morgan relaxed a little. Her anger had turned chill, stiffened to self-scorn. She had let herself get out of control. She had made Wallace Withers mad. That he had made her fighting mad, also, did not excuse her.

She had known, she realized now, what was working in Wallace Withers' mind for more than a year. She had known when she had gone to his brick house up the river, at the time of his wife's death. She had carried hot home-made bread and baked ham; she had gone into the Withers' kitchen and supervised the excited, whispering women there, had made coffee for Wallace Withers and prepared his supper.

With his wife lying stony dead and cancer-yellowed, laid out in her best gray silk, Wallace had looked at Virgie then with approval and thoughtful speculation in his slow, drab eyes.

A rich man, a careful man, a man who lusted for power; she knew now that she had seen then the birth of an idea in Wallace Withers' mind, over that hot meal, that cup of coffee.

And to-night, here by her pleasant fire the idea had emerged, full-grown, ruthlessly practical, dressed up in tight arguments, launched in clipped, perfected phrases, Wallace Withers' cautious phrases that

were always law-particular, impervious to dispute, trampling, amenable to nothing. Nothing, that is, except Virgie's sudden, unconsidered flare of anger.

It was not his arrayed appeal that had made her furious, not his melancholy picture of two lonely houses—

"Not my house!" Virgie had snapped back. "With Lossie crashing around in back and Marian and her gang yelling in the front there's no lonesomeness in this house!"

Wallace had kept to his suave tone, however, wheedling, smooth, switching cleverly to the point that actually lurked in the back of his mind.

The mill. Virgie's mill.

No womanly woman—no gentle, tender-hearted creature, his marching words averred, ought to be worried with running a pulp mill. And there was his timber land, up river, toward the gap. The spruce he had was virgin. He had thought for a while that the Government might take it into the new National Park area, but now that the park boundaries were fixed farther west, there was no danger of that. And the spruce was prime.

"I'll buy it if you want to sell," Virgie interrupted, tersely.

But Wallace did not want to sell. His eyes were on the mill. On the mill that David Morgan had built and Virgie had run successfully ever since David's death. It was then that Virgie had lost her temper.

"Trying to tell me I didn't know enough to run my

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mill!" She snorted now, setting the coffee-cup down on the hearth.

As though she had not steered the mill successfully through the hardest years business had ever known in these Carolina hills! A whole year after David had had his stroke, and for three years since. No profits to speak of—but no red ink either. Credit maintained, and the quality of the Morgan product kept to its high standard. Manufacturers who bought pulp from the Morgan mills knew that they were getting the best. Virgie had fought for that—as David had before her.

"I'd like to see the mill Wallace Withers would run—the old chiseler!" she snorted, fanning her disgust anew. "He buried his poor wife in the cheapest coffin he could buy. Said he knew Annie would be opposed to putting a lot of money underground for no purpose."

She unbuttoned her shoes, eased the straps over her plump ankles, wandered to the window.

Marian ought to be coming in—the crazy young one. It was after ten and the wind was rising. A slow, cold drizzle blackened the windows and, freezing, made the hemlocks bend and twist into tortured patterns. It was the worst early storm Virgie could remember. The boys would grumble about going out into the woods to-morrow, but two truckloads of seedlings had to be put out before the ground froze hard and their roots dried.

Lossie came in with the wood, punched at the fire,

regarded her mistress staring out into the ugly night.

"Want I should wind the clock?" she inquired helpfully.

"You always wind it too tight," Virgie objected. "I'd hate for that clock to get out of fix. David brought it to me all the way from St. Louis once, held it on his lap so the little bronze boy wouldn't get his arm broken off. It's company for me, ticking and striking in the night. Marian thinks it looks terrible—but Marian thinks about everything in this house is old-fashioned and terrible—including me!"

Lossie, hunkered down, poking at the embers, said hesitantly, "It's none of my business, Mis' Morgan—"

"That"—Virgie was dry—"never deterred you yet when you had anything on your mind!"

"It's none of my business," the girl went on in a little, desperate rush, "but I can't help seeing things. She—don't care a thing in this world for Bry Hutton, Mis' Morgan. Not a thing in this world. It's just—you make such a fuss about it—she's stubborn, she's always had her own way a lot."

"She's had her own way too much." Marian's mother set her mouth stiffly. "Bry Hutton can't drink and hell around like he does and then hang around my house!"

"She just wants her own way," persisted Lossie, with the brash familiarity of the old servant. "If you'd just stop fussing about him—let on like it didn't matter one way or another, she'd get tired of him

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mighty quick. But—she likes a fuss going—she likes to get the best of you—”

“Lossie, if it wasn’t that you can make good butter and iron napkins better than anybody I ever had in my kitchen, I’d fire you for your impudence!”

“No, you wouldn’t, Mis’ Morgan. You know what I say is so. You want me to sit up till she comes in?”

“No, you go to bed. I want my breakfast before seven. I’m going up in the woods with the boys.”

“I’d better oil up your boots and set ’em in a warm place, then. You got ’em terrible stiff the other day, wading that branch.”

“I want sausage—and corn muffins. And black coffee. Black—not dirty gray. Shut that door. It makes a draught.”

“Yes’m. If you’d put in a furnace, Mis’ Morgan—it would save a lot—all that ashes and dirt.”

“A lot of people have lived in this house, Lossie Wilson, and nobody ever froze yet.”

“I heard somebody.” Lossie tensed. “Sounded like the front door.”

Three dogs, yapping, flung themselves suddenly out of the dark and around the house. Virgie Morgan pressed switches. The terrace outside, ivy-covered and glittering now with ice, was suddenly illumined. And as swiftly, the dogs were still. She could see them out there now, in the drizzle, taut as so many canine statues, facing a tall figure in a tan rain-coat and limp, rain-soaked hat.

There was another rap on the door, and she could

hear a calm, slow voice, masculine, with youth in it, speaking quietly to the dogs outside.

Behind her Lossie begged, "Don't open it, Mis' Morgan. Let me call Andrew."

"Shush!" Virgie was curt. "Certainly I'll open it. It's one of the boys likely. Don't be a fool. Oh—" she said, as the briny gust of the night rushed in the open door. "How do you do?"

"Good evening." Out of a strange, white, young face, strange dark eyes regarded her. A man—a young man, whom she had never seen before. "I—" he began, hoarsely, smiling in a wan, dazed way, "seem to be lost. I—saw your light—"

"Come in out of the wet," Virgie ordered. Lossie was making little frightened, expostulatory noises but Virgie paid no attention.

"My feet are pretty muddy," the stranger objected. His voice had the sound of cities in it. His clothes had never, obviously, been made for mountain travel. They were sodden, soil-stained, briar-torn.

"Come along in," repeated Virgie, firmly. "Where were you headed for? You're a long way off the highway. This road doesn't go any farther."

This young man, she was certain, was no thug. His face was startlingly pale, with hollow shadows under the eyes. Gunmen traveled in comfort and with speed, but this stranger's shoes were broken and had the anguish of many a stumbling mile written plain on their muddy toes.

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"I didn't—come by the highway." He removed the dripping hat and she knew then that she had been right about him. He had a good head, his eyes looked at her honestly, though haggardly, and he could not be much past twenty-five. "I was trying to find the highway. I came over the mountain." He laughed thinly. "I—think I came over several mountains."

"My heavens!" Virgie exclaimed, warming to him, as she, denied sons, warmed to everything young and male except Bry Hutton. "You mean—you've been walking—weather like this? Come up here by the fire. Never mind the mud—this house is used to mud. Lossie, make some hot coffee right away. You'd better take that soggy coat off quick, young fellow, and let it dry out. How on earth did you get lost on the mountain?"

The stranger sank into a chair, slipping wearily out of the dripping coat. He seemed at the point of utter exhaustion. His breath came in tired gusts. His hands shook.

"I came in—with Johnston's outfit," he said. "We were making estimates on some road-building for the Government. We started to leave—Tuesday—that was—"

"And this is Thursday," declared Virgie, aghast.

She knew what lay beyond that austere, iron-browed ridge on which her house huddled—a house that looked small and helpless as a white hen on that looming slope.

Tangled laurel hells and tricky turns of streams,

coves that were friendly but shut in by savage walls of rock and heartbreaking cliffs, mile after weary mile of peaks and ridges, all alike, all hostile and uncharted to the stranger.

"You mean—you've been roaming around these mountains since Tuesday?" she demanded.

"I—must have been. It seemed like a couple of years to me. You see—I was starting on ahead to send a couple of telegrams from the filling station down there at the cross-roads and the rest of the outfit were supposed to pick me up, when the baggage was loaded. So I walked down the mountain road and I saw what I thought was certainly a short cut down to the store—a perfectly plain trail—"

"Made by a bear, probably. Or by hogs or hunters," supplied Virgie, putting more wood on the blaze. "Then in a little bit you found that you were lost. Men born and raised in these mountains have been lost over there in those laurel hells, son. Folks who know these hills respect them. We don't go up there in the big timber without a guide. Even I don't—and I've lived here in the shadow of those big peaks, and cut timber on them for a lot of years. You were mighty lucky to get out alive, if you ask me."

The young man laughed, wearily. "I know that very well. I went around in a circle for a while—kept coming back to the same big poplar. Rhododendron over my head—no light, no path—"

"My boys," said Virgie, "found a man over toward Huggin's, once, east of Chimneys. He'd been dead

for three months. Just a photographer chap from up north. He had a map. Put the coffee down here, Lossie, and fetch some hot milk and some bread and some of that cold veal. He can have the milk first—better not go too fast if he's been hungry for a while. You didn't tell me your name, son."

"I'm Branford Wills—of Washington."

"And from Georgia or some place before that, by your talk. Kick those shoes off—I think I can find you a dry pair. My husband had small feet—he was a slight man—but maybe you can squeeze them on. Here comes Lossie with the milk. Now don't gulp—take it easy. Hold the cup, Lossie—his hand is unsteady."

Young Mr. Branford Wills sipped the steaming milk, sighed, smiled. He was, so Virgie discerned, a very engaging person when he smiled.

"I grew up in Alabama," he said. "I—think I can manage it now, thank you. May I drink all this?"

"Slowly," Virgie said. "Where did you stay last night, for goodness' sake? It was cold as charity and that sleety rain falling."

"I walked. I didn't dare to stop. I sighted a star and kept moving. The absurd part of it is that I'm supposed to know better. I'm a government cartographer."

"That's a map-maker," supplied Virgie, as Lossie looked perplexed. "So you knew enough to stick to a star, did you? The trouble was that the star didn't

seem to stick to you. Where did you start from?"

"South of the gap—six miles or so."

"In a straight line from here that's twenty miles. But the way you came—"

"Half around the world, I'd say. May I have the coffee now? I'm all right, really. I'm pretty rugged. I've lived out for a number of years."

"Nobody would believe that, by your clothes."

"Oh, we were heading into town, you see. We were through. We were up there checking the contractor's bids. My woods clothes have gone on back to Washington without me—unless the other fellows waited. When I didn't show up at that filling station they may have been worried and uneasy—they may be up there yet."

"We can telephone. But you'd better eat first."

"You're a generous person." He took the hot cup of coffee, eagerly. "Not many people would take in a tramp like me—and believe his story. You didn't tell me your name."

"I'm Mrs. David Morgan. If you've been with the government men you've heard about me." Virgie's lips drew a little straight. Her motherly gray eyes emptied and withdrew a trifle.

"Oh, yes." He was slightly embarrassed. "You belong to the pulp people."

"I'm the Morgan pulp business." A thin edge was on her tone. "Whenever government men want to lay any sin in these mountains on any one, they pick on

me. If there's a scald in the woods or a lot of dead-and-down stuff or any other form of ruin, they cuss the pulp people. And that's me."

"Oh—but I'm sure—"

"Oh, I'm used to it. I don't mind," she went on. "The trouble is, the lumber people came in here ahead of us, slashing and slaughtering the virgin stuff, but the conservation men never admit that. They forget that there were ever sawmills in these mountains. All the crimes are laid to the pulp people. And the Government won't admit that paper is a commodity. That we make something they need—need plenty of it to print their everlasting boondoggling reports and surveys on! Plenty of it for their windy speeches and the blah they mail out to their constituents. Paper is never used by respectable people, to hear them tell it. We're just the pulp gang—a lawless bunch of despoilers and intrenched greeders who go around ravaging and destroying the resources of the country!"

"And polluting the rivers," added Branford Wills, giving her a young grin.

Virgie grinned back. She could not stay angry long—not at any young lad who might have been her own.

"I admit that. But we're spending money to find the remedy, and we're not squawking to the Government for help, like half the other businesses in this country. Don't pay any attention to me, son. I get peeved—and I'm always making speeches. I'm going

to give you a warm bed for the night, and then we'll send a message to your folks—"

"Please don't bother about me." Little spots of color had come into his face, his eyes looked anxious. "I can go on now. I'll get down to town—there is a town, isn't there? Of course there must be—your mill—"

"Six miles," Virgie said, "and you're not going any farther to-night—not in this storm and cold. I'm a mountain woman first and a robber baroness afterwards. Mountain people never turn away strangers."

"Not even when they're on the opposite side of the feud?" he asked, whimsically.

"Well, I don't dignify any argument I get into with the title of feud. Though the Government is about as hen-fussy as I am—sticking its bill into every little mess that the rain would cover up charitably in a couple of days! But I'm like this—if I've got a spoonful of meal, I'll share it. You get some rest to-night. It's a wonder you aren't half dead. You must be as tough as a balsam knot. To-morrow I'll put chains on a car and send you wherever you want to go."

"You're very generous." He stood up, wavering a little and grinning sadly at his weakness. She saw his well-knit, lean young body, the unconscious grace of youth, with silken muscles and leaping blood—youth that knows exactly where it is going and has not learned yet the grudging welcome of the world. "I

was fortunate," he went on, "in having tumbled on your door-step."

"You can pay me back some time. I'm merely circulating some propaganda to the effect that there are one or two decent pulp people in the world. You can carry that word back to Washington."

"I'll do it gladly. I'll add some personal indorsements. In fact, I think I'll launch a campaign—"

He stopped. A tinny horn blared. The dogs set up an excited yelping outside and a car door smacked shut. Then the front door crashed open, letting in a blast of wind, a swish of icy rain, and a girl in a green rubber coat and béret.

A slim, small girl, with reddish-chestnut hair tumbled damply on her collar, with a small, tanned face and very big brown eyes.

"Oh—" she stopped, surprised, seeing him.

"Shut the door," directed Virgie calmly. "This is my daughter, Marian Morgan. This is Mr. Bradford Wills—from Washington. He's staying with us to-night. He's been lost."

"Oh—I—" Wills was confused. A slow, unhappy red crept over his haggard face.

"We've met before," announced Marian, coolly.

"Good gracious," her mother exclaimed.

"He"—Marian's pansy-warm eyes had turned flat and unfriendly, her small red mouth hardened—"he doesn't like pulp people!"

"So I've heard," said Virgie, unperturbed, thinking how like her father Marian was. Shrewd and

small and implacable, like David Morgan, hanging in his gold frame above the mantel fire. "But we've declared a truce on that. It's too darned cold to-night to keep up any kind of a fight."

But Marian was scarcely listening. She was looking at Branford Wills with hostile eyes.

"So you got lost?"

"So it appears. Your mother was charitable enough to take me in and feed me."

"Nothing much happens to mother. He thinks"—Marian turned to her mother, her voice crackling a little—"that all pulp people should be burned at the stake—slowly—he told me so. At the dance the other night."

"That's unfair," declared young Mr. Wills. "I didn't know you. I was spouting to hear my own voice. I apologize."

"Don't bother. It doesn't matter to me in the least." Marian pulled off the damp béret, shook rain from it. "The road is dreadful, Mother—you'll need chains in the morning. I'll go up, I think. Did Lossie make a fire in my room?"

"Andrew did."

"Please," interposed young Mr. Wills, anxiously, "don't go away without letting me explain—I'll eat any amount of crow—I'll even pick the bones if you wish—"

Marian's head went up. She pushed back her damp, fruit-tinted hair with a palm, regarded him aloofly.

"I see no reason to discuss it, thank you. This is

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mother's house. She is free to entertain whomever she likes in it. Good night."

She walked past them, her head held rigidly. Virgie Morgan's mouth drew in at one corner.

"Don't worry about her, son," she advised. "She'll be all over it in the morning. She's a loyal little trick—and all the Morgans are fighters. What did you say to her at that dance?"

He shook his head ruefully. "I can't even remember!" he admitted.

II

THE mill of the Morgan Pulp Company had never been an imposing structure.

David Morgan had built it early in the century, and David Morgan had inherited from a Highland root of his family a preponderant caution, a carefulness that erected slowly, with due regard for foundations and a keen eye out for credit, but no particular anxiety as to appearances.

The blankets on Morgan's big presses were the best woven in Scotland, the sulphide that went into his vats, the cogged chains and bark-strippers, all the finest that could be made. That the walls that inclosed all this were of conglomerate materials, here a smoky jut of concrete blocks, beyond a leaning length of faded red tin roofing, had never troubled David Morgan.

Through the odorous, echoing cavern of his plant the macerated wood went dripping on its way. Slapping belts carried it, mangled and oozing, reeking troughs fed it to trampling rollers and fiery bleaches. But at the end where the sugar-brown rolls of pulp trundled off the floor, there was perfection.

No artist had ever etched the steaming ugliness of the plant, dome and stack, snatching cable and roar-

ing chute. There was no chilled, modern music of steel and glass, no men in white, no ranked battery of shining stacks and retorts. But there was good pulp. Through the defeating lag of the depression, since David's death, Virgie's market had held. When a finishing mill got an order for extra quality paper they wired for Morgan pulp to mill it from. There had been half-time work, half-week lay-offs, but always the pay-roll ready on the fifth and the twentieth, whether Virgie's rusty old leather handbag had a nickel of spending money in it or not.

Virgie had had her old fur coat cut down for Marian; Marian had given up her last year at college.

"Not that it matters, Mother—I know everything now that I care about knowing." Thus gallant Marian. Virgie's eyes misted with maternal pride. And the mill ran on.

Tom Pruitt knew how it had run on. And Virgie Morgan knew.

Tom Pruitt had been David Morgan's friend. Once Tom Pruitt's timber land had covered three counties. Little rivers that he owned had shuttled with trout; coves and ridges to which he held title had sheltered pronged buck and snuffing bear, and the frantic industry of beavers slowed mountain creeks that began and ended on Tom's domain.

Then had come the incredible hysteria of '25.

Men, their blood carbonated by a virus bred of the madresses of Florida, came prowling into the mountains, a wild, acquisitive light in their eyes. They

bought land, optioned it, leased and contracted for it. They promoted pools of excited investors, all intoxicated by the same heady elixir, who bought and leased and optioned.

Rich men from God knows where were to be sold hunting preserves, timber acreage, silicate, mica, and cyanite rights, water-power, hotel sites. Young men in expensive cars, with a glib line of conversation, devastating smiles, and the brash brass of race-track touts, were all over the place. Buses brought sight-seers, prospective customers, candidly callous people who had come along for the ride.

Men came—gray men with the air of affairs, who spoke slowly and little. Men to inspire confidence. They wanted to buy Tom Pruitt's land. Tom thought things out slowly. He was a meditative, heavy, slow-moving man. His great body was slow, but terrible with strength. He could shoulder a poplar bole that four men would grunt over, back it, heave it, with a great suppling of terrific muscles, on a sled. His mind moved in the same way. Gathering way slowly, a little as the forces of nature move. Then a great heave, a groaning, and a decision made.

Tom sold his land finally. There was considerable pressure before they got him up to the point, two concerns bidding for it, and when he at last gave in, there was a tremendous down payment made—more money than Tom Pruitt had ever seen in his life. Too much money. Not a check—Tom was suspicious of checks—but cash in green sheafs, with heavy paper

bands around it. Fifty thousand dollars. And more in five, seven, and ten years, according to the contract.

Tom was dazed. The sum total of his former possession diminished in his mind, became subordinate to the cash. He forgot the great stand of virgin poplar up the Hazel Fork, forgot the mellow bottom land with orchards on it, where his mother's turkeys had fed. All he thought about was this money. Enough money to last as long as he lived, if he spent it. But he would not spend it. He would hold onto it. It numbed and thrilled and frightened him.

He took it to David Morgan, his friend. "You keep it for me," he begged. "Put it some place."

"I'll put it in the bank for you," David, the cautious, said.

But Tom Pruitt had little faith in banks. They got robbed every now and then. You read in the paper where a bank had busted and some fellow gone off to South America with all the money belonging to other people.

"No, you keep it, Dave," Tom begged. "Then if I want it I can get it back again. If a banker gets it he'll lend it to some of these real-estate fellers over to Asheville, and then when the concern goes bust my money will be sunk in one of them subdivisions with fancy gates and red-white-and-blue flags stuck in the ground. And I don't want none of them."

Morgan argued. "I can't put fifty thousand dollars in this old safe, Tom."

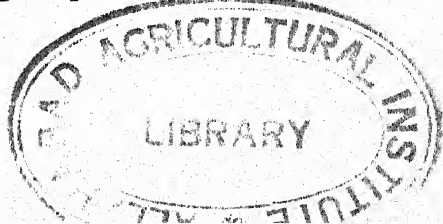
"You put it somewheres, Dave. Put it in something

so I'll know you've got it. Anywhere's is all right—just so I know you got it.”

“I can sell you a share of the mill,” Morgan said abruptly. “Would you want that? I can use your money to buy that spruce up Cheota and to put in a new drier. And you'll own part of the mill.”

Tom's imagination, sluggish in a preponderance of sinew and thew, fired at that. For twenty years he had worked with David Morgan at the mill, getting out pulp wood in snow and in heat, getting it out on time, without knowing or caring that he belonged to an exploited minority. That David Morgan was a capitalist never entered Tom's mind. Dave was his friend. The two of them had a job to do, keeping that mill running. All the people in the town who worked for Dave Morgan had a job, keeping the mill running. David Morgan worked as hard as any of them, and without flats loaded with boles and top timber, the mill could not run. So Tom kept the timber coming in.

But now suddenly he saw further, tasted glory. A piece of the mill! He could understand that. Part of the mill would belong to him. Stacks and vats, rolls and presses, shunting tracks and cables, partly his! Part his the steam that sank on heavy days, laying the unholy stench of sulphides on the ground, like a foul blanket. Part his the languid smoke writing on the sky. Old and lean and taciturn as he was, Tom Pruitt trembled, with sudden exaltation. To own even a fragment of a thing as splendid to his eyes as the



Morgan mill—to touch a brick of it or a pet-cock from an acid tank and think, "Mine!" He wanted nothing more from life.

He surrendered the sheaf of lush green bills to David Morgan. He counted the yellow-and-white printed papers David gave him in return. Fifty of them. A piece of the mill. A big piece of the mill!

Later, when the wind went sadly out of the bubble of the boom, and its sick fabric lolloped down carrying men and banks with it, and mayors and the stewards of churches, down to ruin and suicide and prison, Tom was glad of his heartening part of Morgan's work. The fifth and the seventh year saw the payments on his land defaulted. The title was almost inextricably tangled in a snarl of holding companies, stock companies, second and third mortgages, judgments, and suits.

"Foreclose," David Morgan told Tom, just before David lay down at night to wake in the morning with a crooked, drooling mouth, a helpless arm and leg, and a fogged brain that would never clear again.

But Tom, lost in the frantic trouble of helping Virgie to keep the mill running while David lay helpless in the white house on the mountain, had no time to think of himself or his problems. Like most hill-men he had a dread of the "law." The law tangled a man up in long words, trapped him, betrayed him, frightened him with folded documents awesomely obscure, stripped him in the end.

Too many book words about the law. He was

timorous, and David Morgan drooled on his pillow, groped with one good hand, mumbled frantically, was lifted and tended while Virgie, white-faced and stony-eyed, ran the mill. Ran it with desperate determination, ran it well; but with no mind and no ears for the troubles of other people. Not even for the troubles of loyal old Tom, had he spoken of them. And Tom did not speak.

Stocks had crashed, orders were few, men were frightened, restive, alert for bad news from any quarter. Tom held his peace and kept pulp wood coming into the mill. At night he rode the rusty old truck up the mountain road to Morgan's house, where he shaved helpless David, cut his toe-nails, trimmed the white dry locks of hair, rubbed his weary, wasting back.

In the meantime Tom's land on Little Fork and Hazel Fork became one of a hundred tracts lost in a fog of indefinite involvement; owned and not owned, prey to wandering hunters who set fires and to squatters who moved into the shanties optimistic purchasers had slapped up for their road-building crews, moved in and abused and berated any one who disputed their right of possession.

Tom waited, worried, dubious, and unhappy. Then David Morgan died. And after that there was no chance of selling Morgan pulp stock enough to finance a suit to foreclose and clear title, even if Tom had known how to begin it. Business men, thinking bitterly of bundles of worthlessness lying in bank boxes,

would have laughed in derision at any one who asked them to buy more stocks. Banks, made bitter, too, by terrible and often undeserved public attack upon them, would loan money on nothing. They had loaned, financed, promoted, contributed, helped. Now they were virulently abused, destroyed without reason, calumniated, and caricatured. Let the borrowers weep, said the banks, sulking in their marble silences.

Tom locked the old safe on his beautiful yellow papers, with the gilt seals upon them, pulled his belt tighter, hunched his shoulders, and set to work to help Virgie Morgan save the mill.

It was still partly his and the stacks were still scrawling their bleared autograph of hopefulness upon the Carolina sky.

Afterwards Virgie Morgan looked back on those three years, trying to separate phases, distinguish definite epochs of despair, as a person who has emerged alive from an inundation or a frightful wreck tries to recall incidents of that catastrophe, decide what came first and what after. But only one thing stood out clear—Tom Pruitt's unvarying loyalty, his quiet and unfailing support.

She came into her office of a morning and found him there, pulling at his old hat, eager and undismayed by a mountain blizzard or a broken cog that smashed a bark-stripper and knocked three shafts out of line. She sent him into areas where fire had damaged and Tom tramped the eddying ashes and

brought back estimates of the damage before the embers were cool.

"Including what we paid those torn-down skunks for putting the fire out?" Virgie would be acrid. "They set it, undoubtedly, so we'd have to pay 'em to fight it—but what can we do? We can't let our spruce burn."

"Rangers put most of it out. And them CC boys was there, too. Don't pay Raj Skelton and his boys more'n a dollar apiece."

She could not have operated the mill without old Tom.

There was ice on every branch and dead leaf, every blade of grass and jointed weed, when Tom came through the gate of the mill in that raw November dawn. The wind was still frigid with little promise of a thaw. Smoke was snatched from the stack, torn to pieces, strung along the ground in rags. The steel padlock, with which for twenty years the plank door of the office building had been locked, was like something dipped in melted glass. Tom beat it against the door frame, twisted the key, pushed the door inward on a musty cuddy smelling of mildewed paper and raw chemicals.

The stove was still faintly warm and Tom raked out the ashes into a bucket and kindled a new fire, fanning it encouragingly with his hat.

Virgie talked often about having steam piped across the yards to the office, but somehow they never

found time to begin it. The fire freshened and roared and Tom swept up desultorily, coaxing the dust outside into the scud of the wind.

Then with two buckets he plodded toward the engine room, head down, big hat flapping. He had carefully drained both trucks at sunset last night; hot water would make them start quicker. He took care of all the equipment, he liked to do it. No alcohol in radiators. That made the cars heat on the mountain grades. And to-day things had to be entirely right because Virgie Morgan was going up to look over her reforestation project.

The replanting idea was new. Virgie had begun it, after David Morgan's condition was pronounced hopeless. The Champion people had been doing it for years, setting out seedlings on scalds and cutovers, protecting their areas from fire with their own field force. But David Morgan, slower, hard-headed, had seen the vast acreage of pulp wood all about, been satisfied with the appearance of plenty, not considering the imminence of government encroachment, the withdrawal of hundreds of acres of timber land into the guarded boundaries of a great park.

Now that the park was a reality Virgie had discerned the economic necessity of renewing her failing supply of raw material.

"Not that it will give out in my time—or yours either, Tom. But I've got to think of Marian and Marian's children. A lot of other children, too, who

will need school-books and fancy paper to write love-letters on when we are dead and gone."

They bought their seedlings from the Government and Virgie hired two ex-rangers to attend to her plantings. But she was herself fascinated with this phase of her manufacturing.

"They're such baby things, Tom. Little and fluffy and game as the dickens. I like to see 'em go into the ground—see the wind blowing their little green whiskers!"

Tom filled the radiators of the trucks, turned the engines over carefully to warm the sluggish oil. One would carry the little trees, the tools, the workmen. The other Virgie would drive so that she could return when she pleased.

Tom's old watch, hitched to a braided strip of snakeskin, showed seven o'clock when he went back to the office. Steam was hissing from the boiler-room cocks, two oilers were getting their equipment out of the tool shed. In thirty minutes the whistle would bellow. In twenty-five minutes Virgie's old coupé should enter the mill gate. Tom took an old rag and dabbed dust from Virgie's desk. There was a votive air about what he did, but this devotion was not for Virgie Morgan, the woman. To Tom, Virgie was part of David, part of the mill. She *was* the mill.

Then the telephone rang. Tom shouted into it.

"Hello!"

"Hello, Tom." It was Virgie's voice. "I won't be

going up to the hill with the boys to-day. Send them out as soon as they are ready."

"Hey!" Tom whooped his arguments, always dubious of the efficiency of the instrument. "Hey—this ice ain't going to last. It'll be gone by nine o'clock. I'll put chains on. You needn't worry."

"I'm not worried, Tom." Virgie's voice came evenly. "Not about anything down there. Ice wouldn't scare me. The trouble's up here, at the house. Something's come up. I can't leave right away."

Tom hung up, grunting, went out to drain the radiator of the second truck.

"I reckon her floating island wouldn't float or something," he grumbled.

The whistle blasted. The crashing of the day-shift activity of the mill began. That was somehow all wrong, too. The mill, without Virgie, without David Morgan, ran like the carefully tuned mechanism that it was, but for old Tom Pruitt there was no heart in it.

III

MEANWHILE in her kitchen Virgie Morgan held a hot-water bottle over the sink, filled it gingerly, ducking her head as the kettle steamed.

Lossie spooned coffee into a percolator. Her brassy waves were cushioned in a heavy net, her skin looked dry and choked in the raw daylight.

"Think it's pneumonia?" she asked, taking the kettle from her mistress' hand.

"A chill doesn't have to be pneumonia," Virgie said, "but his voice sounds funny and I heard him coughing a lot in the night. That bed was damp probably. Nobody has slept up there in a time. He should have had a fire—worn out the way he was."

"If this house just had a furnace in it—"

"Now, don't go harping on that, Lossie Wilson," Virgie snapped. "Carry up some coal before the doctor comes."

Lossie picked up the coal bucket, stepped into the back hall to remove her hairnet and dab some grayish-lavender powder on her nose. The young man coughing in the bed upstairs had romantic dark eyes and a mouth cut wide for laughter. Lossie's heart had palpitated when she fed him veal and coffee the night before. Of course, she thought with some bitterness,

there was no use counting on any man, with Marian Morgan around!

Marian, slim and piquant, with her odd, bitter, tantalizing flavor, enslaved them all whether she wanted them or not. But Marian hadn't appeared to hit it off so much with this young Mr. Wills, who had been lost on the mountain. Lossie rolled down her sleeves and fastened her cuffs. She wore a maid's cap in the dining-room because Marian raised Ned if she left it off, but in the hall upstairs she dragged off the white wisp and stuffed it in her apron pocket.

But all these devoted pains were wasted after all. Branford Wills was asleep. Red-hot coins of color burned in his cheeks, his hair was disordered and dry looking, his hands twitched, thrusting out of the blue sleeves of a pair of David Morgan's old pajamas.

"He's got something, sure enough," Lossie decided, as she laid coal softly on the fire.

Virgie came up presently, tucked the hot-water bottle under the young stranger's feet, looked at him with troubled eyes.

"He's sick, all right," she said. "And I feel responsible. Putting him in this cold tomb of a room—after two nights out on that mountain."

"Well, you took him in," Lossie comforted her in a whisper. "A lot of people would have set the dog on a trampy looking thing like him."

"I can let his people know—and we can take good care of him, anyway," Virgie said.

Something appealing about this dark young head

on the pillow. She had wanted three sons of her own—three boys, tall, dark, and audacious. And Heaven had given her only Marian who was small and slim and peppery—but audacious enough, goodness knew!

Marian Morgan troubled her mother's heart. She had been reared in pride and the gentle humility which is the true essence of pride, the deep core of nobility. David Morgan had had it—a fineness that set him apart in an honorable place, yet never lost for him the fellowship of any honest man. Virgie had it. She could drive a muddy truck into the most remote reach of her holdings, she could wear corduroy breeches and an old rain-coat and patch a leaky gas-line with friction tape, yet the men who addressed her always took off their hats. And for a mountain man to remove his hat in the presence of a mere female is epochal.

But in Marian this pride was brittled to a pert egotism. She was too free where she should have been reticent, she was, so Virgie suspected, a tilt-headed little snob among elders who deserved respect. She drove too fast and went about with young fellows who drank and were glib and irreverent and contemptuous of old, steadfast things, who ignored good taste. Marian would never understand her mother's poignant, cheated feeling of maternal anxiety, over this sick lad in her care. To Marian a young man was either exciting or an awful droop.

"And either way I won't like it," Virgie thought, heavily.

Wills stirred as the hot bottle warmed him, lifted his head, looked startled.

"Oh, sorry—I'm getting up right away." He licked his dry lips. "Some one should have called me—"

"You're not getting up just yet," Virgie interposed. "You've got a temperature."

"That's odd." He groped confusedly with his long, facile hands. "I'm never sick. I'll be all right in an hour or two. I was pretty tired—and wet, too."

"Lie down," ordered Virgie, tersely, "and don't talk too much. I'll let your outfit know where you are. But for the present you stay here."

"Please, Mrs. Morgan—I can't be a nuisance to you—" He broke off with a racking cough and pain snatched at him. He looked perplexed and in anguish. He wiped his lips with a corner of the sheet. "I—guess—I am sick!" he muttered, lying back again.

Virgie shifted the counterpane, straightened the shades, poked the fire, went downstairs again. In the breakfast-room Marian was sugaring her fruit. Her hair was brushed flat, the sleeves of her orange pajamas flapped, she looked reproachful.

"Lossie says that hobo is sick," she said. "Have we got him on our hands?"

Virgie sat down, poured her coffee, fingered the toast, raised her voice. "Lossie! I can't eat this cold stuff. Make some hot. Yes, he's sick—it looks like pneumonia. And he's no hobo. I've telephoned for the doctor and you'll have to stay here till he comes. I've got to get down to the mill."

"But I don't know a thing about pneumonia!"

"You aren't expected to know. That's what we have the doctor for. You see that Lossie keeps the fire up. I'll send Ada Clark out if I can get hold of her. She's a good nurse, if she does believe in fortunes and numerology and all that junk."

"Oh, my heavens, Mother! She snuffles and her nose is always red, and she thinks that she's going to be kidnapped or something every time she sticks her silly head outside."

"Well, you don't have to look at her. She can take care of this boy till he's well enough to be moved somewhere—home, if he has any home."

"I wouldn't call him a boy. He's over twenty-five, if he's a minute!"

"Well, I'm over fifty and that entitles me to call most any man a boy!"

Virgie went out through the kitchen, collecting a hot kettle on the way. Every year winter came to the mountains with a wretched, freezing storm like this. Her little car would be hard to start.

She drove slowly down the icy road, gripping the steering-wheel, hating the treacherous going. Her hat felt insecure on her head. Her gray hair was thick and strong and these cocky little hats had no crowns anyway.

As she went through the mill gate her swift eye measured every sign and sound, every spouting feather of steam, every odor. The mill was roaring on—roaring on without her.

The bark drums would be gnashing away, ripping stout green wood to pieces, grinding, crushing, feeding the tremulous fibers to bubbling digesters that licked acid lips and gulped and devoured and altered. Belts were walloping, quiet men walked around squinting into glass tubes, the back-carrier shuttled out, vomiting the ragged epidermis of once proud timber.

Tom was anxious. Virgie felt better when she saw his gaunt face. At least Tom had missed her.

She spent a half-hour telephoning, then was properly indignant.

"Those government men went along back to Washington. Bridges says they said something about waiting for this young Wills, then they decided that probably he'd caught a ride down the mountain. This is a crazy country! If you catch a six-inch fish out of a creek up there in the forest a ranger will chase you a mile—but a man with brains and potentialities can go to waste anywhere and nobody bothers about it!"

But Tom was not worrying about young Mr. Wills. A government man more or less could be lost in the laurel hells indefinitely without loss to the Morgan mill. Tom had other things on his mind.

"Old man Perry Bennett come in." Tom pushed off his wide hat, worried his forelock. "He says he reckons he won't sell you that piece up Tuckaseegee. He says he got a better offer on it."

Virgie's mind stiffened to attention. "Who'd buy that cutover piece—and what for?"

"Champion maybe."

"Champion have got all they want. And even with the Government taking their best acreage, they wouldn't bother with a little thickety piece like old Bennett's. Tom, I think I see a few things you don't know about. You let me handle this."

"I ain't itchin' to handle Perry Bennett."

Virgie remembered presently to pull off her hat and spike it on the hook on the door. The telephone purred. Marian's voice came, thin, with an edge of fright on it.

"Mother, it is pneumonia!"

"Keep your head on," counseled her mother, dryly. "Open the window and keep the fire going. I'll get Ada Clark out there in a little." She hung up. "Where's Lucy?" she demanded.

The chair, the little desk, the covered typewriter on the other side of the office were vacant. So was the prim little wooden costumer in the corner where every morning Lucy Fields, Virgie's secretary, hung up her green wool coat, her small black hat.

Tom pulled out his ponderous watch. "It ain't but four minutes after eight."

"My lord," muttered Virgie wearily, "I thought it was most noon."

Lucy came in, on time to the minute, taking off her overshoes, setting them neatly in the corner.

Lucy Fields was another of those who comforted Virgie Morgan. Lucy's quiet hazel eyes, her husky voice and smooth hair, gave an air of calm to the

cluttered bedlam of the office. Lucy had gone to high school with Marian, but when Marian was setting out for college with two trunks full of clothes, and a little roadster of her own, Lucy was learning Gregg and swift, assured ways of knowing exactly which way a lost car of potash might be routed.

Lucy's mother made watermelon-rind pickles and tufted counterpanes for tourists. In good weather the counterpanes hung on clothes-lines on the porch of the Fields' cottage, facing the highway.

Marian was sorry occasionally for Lucy, inviting her out to supper, suavely overlooking Lucy's made-over frocks, her half-soled shoes. But when there were young men at the house on the mountain, with dancing and gaiety, Lucy was not invited.

"She blushes so. She squirms, actually!" Marian justified this omission. "For a girl with the poise she has around the plant, to let the boys rattle her so and make her tongue-tied, is silly—but that's the way Lucy is!"

There were things about Lucy that Virgie was sure she knew. Prim little secrets that Lucy's quiet eyes hid. Still maids who fed on dreams, with no satin or moonlight or rose petals with which to wrap the timid bones of dreams, suffered. Virgie knew. She had been a tongue-tied, tormented girl in hand-me-downs, herself.

She sent Lucy out into the mill for the chemical report.

"She'll have a good day and every word will be spelled right if she sees Stanley Daniels first," she told Tom Pruitt.

"Yeah—but suppose he goes to mooning around and gets two or three formulas mixed up?" Tom grumbled. "Them sallow fellers rattle easy."

"He won't rattle. He's as hard as nails, that boy!" Virgie's swift eye was running down the production sheet. Nothing wrong there. Like a well-tuned organ under her competent fingers, the mill played a harmonized symphony of accomplishment. Only one clash. On a yellow bit of flimsy she scowled at it. "Look here, Tom. We're going to be short a car Monday when that Pittsboro order is ready to go out. You better tell Max to get the yard on the wire and jack 'em up. Tell 'em we want that car set in here off Number Four Sunday night."

"You hadn't ought to bawled that agent out about that potash," Tom remarked, with the familiarity of an old friend. "You got him crank-sided at us, he'll snarl our rolling stock up now just to get even."

"Any time a fresh freight agent gets funny with me he's going to hear about it! If it wasn't for us and one or two mining people over here they could pull up their dinky little railroad and make stove-wood out of the trestles! Tell Max I said they better get that car set because I'm thinking about buying a fleet of trucks."

"Well, I never knowed you to make a wrong

move," sighed Tom, "but them big trucks cost a terrible lot. Just the tires—you ever took a good look at them big tires?"

"Yes, I've looked at 'em. And I've made a few wrong moves, too, Tom, though a blind old feller like you wouldn't know. Trouble with me is"—Virgie pushed back her heavy hair—"I've mixed up being a woman and running a mill!"

"Well, I don't know of no way you can stop being a woman." Tom was comforting. "And when you stop running this mill you lemme know a couple of days ahead, so's I can hunt me a good dry cave with some sassafras growing handy."

"Get on out of here," ordered Virgie, a trifle hoarsely. "We'll get empties set in here by next corn-planting time, I reckon."

Tom Pruitt turned his old hat around twice, shrugged his suspenders up, went out.

Mis' Morgan was a grand woman. Tetchy—but a grand woman.

The sulphide vats breathed their foul breath into the fresh autumn morning. Tom sniffed the vile reek and loved it.

IV

THERE is something sudden, something intrepid and challenging about a mountain town.

A settlement gathered together on the plain marks the place where men paused, where they delayed and rested. But a town under a scarp, with foothold on the iron, hostile knees of the ranges, with quarreling streams gashing a roadway past the heart-straining rise of a ridge for a barbican, has something valorous about it; cocky, self-contained, a little defiant.

Men climbed to it by inching determination; over boulders in the beds of streams, toiling through wind gaps, wagons taken down and carried over, horses dragged by the bit around sheer brows where the swing of a bird made a man dizzy.

Through black mountain darks and fierce mountain thunder, men climbed to these places because there they wished to be, aloof, self-sufficient, with an independence as touchy as the ring of a blade.

Rivers are tamed now, and roads, like the traveling paths of ants, snake and climb and hair-pin, letting the world roar in, but the stiff-backed valiance of little mountain towns is not destroyed. They can get along. Fat hogs in rail pens; collards in green rows after frost; apples drying on shed roofs; wood smoke

with its haunting nostalgia at dusk. They can get along.

Stanley Daniels, chemist for the Morgan mill, lean and thirty, out of the University of Missouri, with young intolerance and the unbearable sting and surge of young ambition in his blood, felt and resented this cool remoteness of the mountain town clustered about the mill.

He was in it and of it, he was of hill stock from the Ozark country, yet this little town had never let him in. He lived at a rambling green house facing the main highway and the railroad; a house needing paint, with a vast asparagus fern on the porch and a row of stiff, indifferent chairs around the wall of the parlor, with five kinds of meat set out in the long dining-room and the linen not always clean.

The landlady, a Mrs. Gill, mothered him, washed his socks for him, her face screwed up at the terrible chemical odors he brought in with him. Her other boarders, widowers torn up by the roots, judges and lawyers in court week, odds and ends of detached humanity, were pleasant enough to him. He played rummy with the galax-and-herb buyer and two lumber cruisers in the evenings; he listened to basket-ball scores and sport forecasts on the radio, until some boarder would gently and reproachfully remind him that Amos and Andy were imminent.

He was a young man in the quiet backwater of old lives drifted together. He let the elders admire his youth and take the winds of life, as they blow for

youth, vicariously in their faces through him, but he never felt that he belonged.

He was a bird alight, he was a hawk in the wind, something alive briefly, caught in the slow motion of a mountain mill village; sooner or later he would be caught up in a stronger current. But while this hiatus in his life lasted he would ease it by such gracious means as came to his hand. And the most gracious of these gifts was Lucy Fields.

Lucy was tuned deep. She had quiet splendors. She read a great deal and thought a great deal and she was as foreign to her thin, leather-skinned little mother, who wore asafetida around her neck all winter, as the moon is foreign to a barnyard lantern.

Lucy still ached a little because she had not been able to go to college. She winced when her mother said "over yan," or cleaned her dry finger-nails with the scissors. She worked hard and believed that Virgie Morgan was the finest woman in the world.

Stanley Daniels was pleased by Lucy, warmed by her admiration, sensed the fine gold under the quiet shyness, generously let her go on incubating little dreams about him while he waited, cannily, committing himself to nothing, waiting for whatever more splendid offering life might be saving for him.

When the whistle moaned at five o'clock he waited for her. She was always conscientiously a little late. She dabbed about, dusted, licked stamps, hated hurrying out of the office. Usually Virgie or Tom had to shoo her out.

"Get along home, Lucy—your beau won't wait out there all night in this raw weather."

Lucy powdered her small straight nose, put on a pale touch of rouge, gave the black hat the smartest tilt its nondescript line permitted, turned up the collar of her green coat. Steam bent, scudding, torn to shatters, in the yard outside the window. The hostile early winter wind had not relented. She would, thought Lucy wearily, have to buy a lot of coal. She got it at cost at the mill, but even at that it precluded any thought of a new winter coat. Her mother had broken her glasses again. She was always laying them on the edges of things, then nearsightedly brushing them off.

The wind dragged at Lucy's skirt and made her thin silk hose feel like coatings of ice on her legs as she went down the cinder road to the gate. But at the sight of Stanley Daniels, hunched in a sheltered spot, warmth flooded her body, sang in her blood, made her cheeks burn and her eyes grow bright.

"Oh, hello!" The wind caught at her voice but could not chill the shine of her eyes. "Were you waiting for me? You must be absolutely stiff. Let's walk fast."

Daniels fell briskly into step. "Is this the best you can do in Carolina—this kind of weather? What about all those songs—moonlight and fields of white, trees in bloom, sweet perfume—all that stuff?"

"Oh, that's for summer. Fall isn't very nice, anywhere—not late fall anyway."

"I'm worrying about some tests I'm running," he said. "If the steam gets low in that shanty where I work they might freeze and burst the tubes, and then a week's work will be all shot to heck. I suppose you've heard about the lost man who blundered into the Morgan house last night?"

"Mrs. Morgan told me that he'd developed pneumonia. Ada Clark went up to take care of him."

"He wasn't so dumb—he picked the right doorstep to collapse on."

"It was lucky for him, all right." Lucy's laugh was a silver tinkle. "But think how awful to be lost on the mountain for three days and two nights? I'm surely glad he didn't pick our house. Mother would have gone stark crazy with excitement and I'd have had to sleep on the ironing board."

"Or in the bathtub," he supplemented.

"Our house," Lucy corrected, calmly, "doesn't possess a bathtub. This town hasn't been modern so very long. We only got sewers last year and most people still have to thaw out the pump on frosty mornings."

They were at the gate of Daniels' shabby boarding-house. Lucy's home was at the end of a little street farther on. A scrap of a street that ran headlong into the mountain and stopped. They stood for a moment and Lucy's wrists tingled. Would he walk home with her? He never had yet—

Obviously he was not going on. He tipped his hat,

set it more firmly on his head, said with a smile, "Better hurry in out of this wind."

Every night Lucy waited, quivering. Sometimes he said, "Going to be home after a while?"

And she, trying to be elaborately casual, would keep down her eagerness. "What's to-day? Tuesday? Yes, I'll be home to-night. Eight o'clock?"

But to-night he only smiled at her again, said good night, went up the quaking green steps. Lucy struggled with her disappointment, walked home rapidly, certain what she would find there. A stuffy, too-warm room, littered with threads and snips of cotton, dull lamplight, a smell of frying or the blatant offense of cabbage.

The rusty old red sofa, the cotton cushion in the rocker with cat-hairs all over it, her mother in felt bedroom slippers, her hair waved on the curling iron, a brown gingham apron with the front fastened with safety-pins. All dreary, all hopeless and hateful to Lucy's eyes, though she kept her voice to a cheerful note of patience.

But in her own bleak, frigid bedroom with the few dance programs and wistful souvenirs pinned to the window curtains, she let rebellion tear at her. Life was so unfair. Up there, high on the mountain where lights winked briefly, was Marian Morgan, who had everything, held it all casually as though it were her due!

Lucy put on a dark cotton dress, hung her blue

working outfit carefully away, whisking flakes of sawdust from the skirt. She looked through the window to that high wink of light on the mountain, wondering about the young man who had stumbled in out of the laurel. Even that bit of excitement had had to happen to Marian Morgan. But after all, the ironing board would be a hard bed!

Stanley Daniels scrubbed the yellowish stains from his fingers, brushed his hair flat, buttoned his coat, and went down to Mrs. Gill's dining-room. There was a caramel fragrance, sharp and tangy. Her pies had run over in the oven again.

"Mock cherry," she bragged, complacently, "and if you can tell the difference, you're the first! Looks like winter was here, don't it? And ain't it awful about that young feller up at Morgans'?"

"Is he worse?" Daniels inquired, indifferently.

"I ain't heard if he is. But it's terrible to think what might 'a happened to him out there in them mountains. I put you a place here, Mr. Daniels, because one of my neighbors has decided to come in and eat with us. This is Mr. Wallace Withers, Mr. Daniels. Mr. Daniels works at the mill."

"How do you do, Mr. Withers?" Stanley Daniels regarded the stranger on his left, saw only a well-knit, aging man with a weather-tinted face, narrow nostrils, and eyes that revealed nothing. A man dressed in the kind of drab wool suit that country men of substance save for church and funerals. With-

ers' hands were stubby but very clean. He cut his food into small morsels and clicked his teeth as he ate.

"Lived here long, Mr. Withers?" Daniels asked, again, after a little interval of gustatory silence.

"Born here." Withers was terse. "Born in the house where I live now. My father was born there."

"They built it of good heart timber then. No wood like that available any more, at any price," Daniels said.

"The men that built it were heart timber, too." Withers spooned sugar. "No scamp work on that building, like you see nowadays. Say you work for Virgie Morgan?"

"I'm a chemist over there—yes, sir."

"Ain't rushed to death these days, I reckon?"

"Not rushed particularly, but business holds up very well. Mrs. Morgan has managed to hold her markets."

"Making any money, you think?"

Stanley Daniels was young. Flattered a little by the attention of this older man, he let himself expand a trifle. The mill, in his opinion, was holding its own, but not making the profits that it should. Mrs. Morgan was proud, but too conservative, keeping to old traditions, making a product too good and too expensive for the bulk of her trade.

"She can't hope to compete with big fellows like Champion—she doesn't try. And she can't put up her prices to make the profit she should on the grade of

stuff we are milling—not in these tight times. So she takes a thin margin and keeps the men at work—but, as a matter of fact, she could run a grade of pulp good enough for the carton trade and other people she sells to for much less than it costs her now, if it weren't for her terrific pride in the Morgan brand."

"Pride's all right"—Wallace Withers clicked his teeth—"but stock holders can't cut coupons of it, hey? You're a pretty shrewd young feller, I see. Own any stock over there?"

"No, sir—I don't think they are selling any."

"If a forward-looking young chap like you owned a piece of it—a good voting block—it might be a good thing, you think? Get new blood in—catch up with these modern notions."

"I think"—Daniels considered the question soberly—"that it would be a good thing. Good for the mill—and for Mrs. Morgan herself."

"Know that girl of hers?"

"Only casually."

"You ain't figuring on marrying the boss's daughter, then?" Withers cackled his dry-leaf laugh. "Most young fellers would be speculatin' on a chance like that."

"No, I'm not planning to marry. I want to be free for a while. There are things that I want to do—things that require freedom from responsibility." Young Daniels was complacent. "Smoke, Mr. Withers?"

"Not that kind. I got a cigar here. Well, young

man, I enjoyed talking to you. Not many young fellows talk common sense any more. Know where I live? Brick house out the river road, toward the reservation. Come out and talk to me some rainy evening. I'm always figuring on one thing or another—I like to talk to a business man, especially a young one. We might get together on something, maybe."

"Thank you. I'd be glad to come."

Daniels went up to his room. A bare chamber with an iron bed, warmed but thinly by the stove in the hall. He turned on a dangling bulb and turned over the magazines on a stand, indifferently.

He was feeling suave and important. A gray-haired man of affairs had listened to him, respectfully. Slowly, so decided young Mr. Daniels, the hide-bound world was beginning to acknowledge the power of young thought, the superior attack of young minds. Slowly the ancient jealousies died.

They were coming to it—the sour, blind oldsters! Realizing, admitting at last, what a mess they had made of the affairs of the world!

Stanley Daniels lighted a cigarette elaborately, went to the mirror, and smoothed back his hair. He straightened his shoulders a little, well-satisfied with what the glass reflected. A young business man! He forgot poor little Lucy Fields utterly.

V

BACK in the Morgan house Marian Morgan sat in Branford Wills's room watching him.

Ada Clark was having her supper and Marian was on duty and annoyed with the vigil. Illness frightened her, and this young man had displeased her. She was not of the type to forgive easily. She sat on the edge of her chair, ready to escape as soon as possible. The firelight brought out the russet and purple tints in her hair, made shadows on her cheeks below her amazing lashes.

Branford Wills had trouble with his perceptions. They were febrile and wild, they told him fantastic lies. This girl was not there, of course. Her red mouth, her watching quiet eyes.

He said, in a voice made dry and strange by fever, "You aren't real, of course. I'm sick as the deuce."

She came nearer. Delusions did not wear red wool, did not have fingers cool as lilies.

"A little ice on your tongue?" That was real. "It's pretty bad, I know. I had it once. You'll feel rotten for two or three days, then a lot of terrible pain. They give you whisky and quinine and you're better."

"This is disagreeable for you. You don't like me."

"That doesn't matter." She put more ice in his

mouth. "I get furious when people pick on mother. This whole country would have been destitute during these bad times if she hadn't been the shrewdest manager in the world."

He had, so Marian noted, absurdly slender, graceful hands. One nail was broken, it snagged the blanket. Marian brought the scissors.

"Hold still till I fix this."

The twitching heat in his fingers disturbed her. She brought a cool cloth and sponged his palms and the backs of his hands where the tendons stood up and thin, dark hair grew. She felt queerly motherly and tender as she covered the hands with a blanket.

For a year she had laughed at men, evaded them, taken what they had to offer—dances, new cars to ride in, flowers, candy—but so far the men had all been alike. One careless word, one relaxed moment, the guard down for an instant, and they were all alike. Country boys with too much blood in their veins.

But this man did not grip her fingers hard nor look meaningly up into her eyes. He whispered, "Thank you," when Marian straightened the pillow, and her heart gave a curious jerk.

She had wished for brothers as her mother had wished for sons. And she missed her father. But this man—feeling was strange and different from any family feeling. It was sharp and troubling and it angered Marian because it penetrated the grim guard

she had built up to keep her heart for herself, untouched and aloof and cool.

When Ada Clark came back, Marian went downstairs and wandered aimlessly through the rooms. The windows were dark and beyond the black glass the mountain night was cold and lonely, but the dark loneliness suited her mood. Was this falling in love? She stiffened against that thought. Love was weakness, love was surrender—and she was of the blood of David Morgan, who had tolerated no weakness and never known the meaning of surrender.

Bry Hutton telephoned and she answered him curtly, while Lossie stared and listened from the kitchen. No, she said, she didn't want to go out. No, she wasn't mad about anything. She was just not interested.

Bry was pettish. The spoiled only son of a cattle buyer who had made a great deal of money. Bry could not grasp the fact that any girl could be disinterested in him. He grew angry and acid.

"I suppose it's that fellow who fainted on your door-step. Pretty darned clever—picking the right house to stumble into!"

"Suppose it is!" Marian snapped back. "What of it?"

"Oh, nothing at all." Bry was blandly nasty over the wire. "Nothing at all—to me."

"So pleased you can be calm about it," Marian cut back, in her best superior tone. "My reason happens

to be quite different but after all it's my own affair, Bry. I just don't happen to want to go out with you to-night."

"Humph!" sniffed Lossie, listening in the passage and speaking to herself. "Your reason is your own affair all right—but it's six foot tall and talks bass—or I'm a monkey's aunt Lizzie!"

But Marian did not hear. She sat and looked at the fire. She sat there for hours.

VI

VIRGIE MORGAN drove up the mountain road toward Hazel Fork on a foggy winter morning. The road was narrow and rutted with outcropping boulders that raked the crank-case of the old truck. Stumps banged the hubcaps on either side. Frost oozed from the ground, making a gravy-like sludge over the still-frozen iron of the mountain slope. On the north slopes every shadowy place was rigid with frost, with starlike crystals showing where moisture had stood. The sun was wan with its own death as Virgie Morgan drove up the twisting mountain road.

She drove slowly and alone. Her booted toe prodded the grunting old engine. She wore riding trousers and a leather coat left open at the throat. Her gray felt hat had been fashionable in the first year of the Hoover administration. Now it was deep and limp and outmoded, but Virgie clung to it because it stuck on, in any kind of wind, and shed the rain.

Somewhere, up toward the crest of the ridge, her two foresters were laying out a replanting job and Virgie was going up, through the thin morning air, to have a look at it.

The road climbed back and forth, through a cut-over wilderness grown up to scrub, sumac, and laurel

thicket. Here and there an old seed spruce stood like a ragged prophet gesturing doom with thinning branches. Down the slope could be seen the small, green tufty feathers that were its progeny. Brave little rascals, not so tall as the rough sedge grass, hardly taller than the swarming briars. Not enough of them either. Replant this slope, and in twenty years when Marian's temples were beginning to get gray there would be a noble stand of timber here. Enough to educate her children.

"And I'll hobble up here on my rheumatic feet and take a look at it through my bifocals," Virgie mused aloud.

The thought of Marian's children, grown tall, with squawky, adolescent voices, made Virgie feel suddenly old and sorry for herself, and even the recollection that a man had wanted to marry her did not help—not when the man was old Wallace Withers.

No woman with property need be flattered by the attentions of Withers. "An Indian squaw would suit him if she owned a couple of oil-wells," scorned Virgie.

The truck overheated on the stiff grade and she waited for the engine to cool, getting down and trampling the grass, counting the spruce seedlings that were near at hand. A green tasseling of them blew in the wind. The trouble was that 90 per cent of them would perish. Fires would slaver up the mountainside, stock would break down the slender spires of green,

spring floods gully the soil, leaving the roots bare to parch in unfriendly hardpan.

She walked away, and stood looking off into the blue distances.

Mountaintops always made her think of David, her husband. He had been a mountaintop person, gusty like the winds, a little bleak in season, rooted in permanence, far-seeing, austere, and immovable. Forces that assailed him had fallen short as so many flung feathers. Blame had never touched him. His faith had been iron-cored like the everlasting rocks. She drew a deep breath and lifted her head, trembling a little as she always did when she thought of filling David's shoes. Then behind her on the twisting one-way road, she heard the labored piston-slaps of another straining motor.

"Somebody's lost," she said aloud, trampling on her starter. The truck jangled as the other car came up behind and stopped with a choked gurgle. A black car, heavy and expensive, with two strange men in it. Virgie pulled out of the ruts, her old engine wallowing, got out and walked back.

"You've missed your road," she said. "This is nothing but a woods' trail. You'll have trouble with that heavy car if you try to go any farther."

"We're looking for a piece of land formerly owned by a man named Pruitt," the taller of the pair said. "They told us at the filling station that this was the direct road."

They were city men of a type Virgie Morgan knew

well. All one tint of gray, close-shaven, milled like dollars, the cautious click of shrewd finance in their voices. They looked like bankers, bleached and tailored, but Virgie knew personally all the bankers in that part of the state and these were men she had never seen before. These were cannier men than bankers, probably, the kind who, when a period of financial hysteria ends, are usually found owning everything loose.

"Tom's land is on the other side of the ridge," Virgie told them. "You'll have to walk three-quarters of a mile. Do you belong to that Phillips' outfit? They defaulted on everything they bought in this country."

"We"—the older man had thin lips and a mouth that shut like a trap—"are victims of the Phillips' outfit."

Virgie kept silent. Very likely these were some of the crowd who had put up the money to back Phillips. Obviously they had no idea who she was. They thought her a quaint mountain character, probably, so she kept to the part, staring dully and curiously at them, as mountain people did.

The younger of the pair got out and unscrewed the radiator cap, jumping as a spout of steam shot up. The older sat still, frowning irritably. A pricking unease in Virgie's mind told her that she had seen this older man before some time. On some finance committee, perhaps, in that anguished year when David lay paralyzed and helpless and she was fighting to keep the mill running.

She said, letting her voice drawl nasally, "That's a bad grade back yonder. Better let it cool off some more."

Slamming her worn gears, she drove on up the ridge, turning south at her line and bumping across a stony meadow, sun-washed and pleasant.

Little brown birds flashed among the leafless sumacs and shook seeds from dried haws, chattering. A crossbill sat on a bent cedar and squalled at her, but Virgie was thinking fast and hardly heard him.

What were two men, with the look of bonds and shares about them, prowling away up here for, where only lean cattle and men on muleback were accustomed to go?

She found her foresters eating their lunch, their legs dangling from the muddy tail of their truck. She shared their lukewarm coffee, inspected the damp little hillocks where baby spruce stood and shivered, feeling their cold, small bewildered roots groping in strange, chill darkness.

"I hope we get a snow so they don't dry out too fast," she said.

"We heard a car a while back," one of the men said. "See anybody down that way, Mis' Morgan?"

"I was going to speak about that." Virgie screwed the lid on a thermos bottle. "Much obliged, you boys—I meant to get home for lunch but I got delayed, as usual. About that car—I saw 'em. And I want you to quit early—you, too, Joe—knock off before three, leave the truck here, and go over the other side down

toward Little Fork. There's a piece of hardwood down there—a hundred and sixty-odd acres. Take a good look at it and call me up to-night."

"Pruitt's stuff, eh?" said Joe, who knew these timbered slopes and ridges as well as Virgie did.

"It used to be Pruitt's stuff. Something's up. And I'm not going to let Tom be gypped by another bunch of slick talkers with blue-prints in their hands and black iniquity in their minds. Don't call up till after seven, hear? And don't talk to anybody but me about this business."

"Sure, boss—we understand. You don't want it mentioned to Pruitt, then?"

"I'll talk to Pruitt. Crank this old caboose for me, will you?"

She was thinking so absorbedly as she drove in at the gate of the plant that she ran over a steam hose and ripped a sizable sliver from the corner of the tool-house before she came to and stopped the truck.

Tom Pruitt heard the impact of her arrival and came slouching out of the bark shed, picking gum off the palms of his hands.

"Anybody else bust up the premises like that and you'd fire him," he drawled amiably. "That steerin'-gear busted?"

"Oh, shut up!" grumbled Virgie, climbing down stiffly.

She was irritated by Tom. No man so huge should be so naïve, so helpless.

"Whoever stuck that shanty out there in the way

must have thought we'd be hauling stuff in here in ox carts forever," Virgie continued to fume as she tramped into the office.

Tom opened the door for her. "I reckon Dave put it there," he said, calmly.

"Come in here," Virgie ordered. "I want to talk to you."

Tom followed her obediently and began punching at the stove. Virgie made a complicated task out of getting her hat off and her desk opened. She did not look at Tom. She was exasperated, and when her temper got the upper hand her tongue slipped, and she did not want it to slip. She had to say the right thing to Tom, who was so helpless in the presence of law and finance and the crisscross web men weave of these two strands to hide the simple intent of their acts. Tom's impulses were all feral and primitive. He would not shrink at stalking up the mountainside with an old squirrel gun to do private reprisal upon him who had wronged him, but let that defrauder come at him with a legal paper with seals on it and Tom would be frightened into a stunned daze from which he would inevitably arouse, the loser.

"Sit down," directed Virgie, "and don't squirm. Lucy, you go out and get the time slips. Pruitt and I have got business to talk over."

Lucy rose meekly, put on her coat. "How soon shall I come back, Mrs. Morgan?"

"Fifteen minutes is all I need. And if you hang around that laboratory, walk in the air some before

you come back in here. There may be worse smells than young Daniels invents, but Satan has got a monopoly on 'em."

Tom draped his long legs over a stool and twisted his hat.

"I reckon you found a seeder tree cut that hadn't ought to be cut," he said. "I expect I done it."

Virgie swiveled her chair around. The darkened leather cushion on the back of it still held the print of David Morgan's lean shoulder-blades.

"I'm not going to talk about Morgan trees," she said. "I want to talk about yours. Do you know anything about that property of yours over the ridge—that hardwood tract? What shape is it in?"

Tom twisted the hat nervously. "I sold it. 'Way back in '26. You knew about that I reckon. I sold it to that Phillips' outfit. They paid me the first payment. They ain't never paid any more."

"What sort of papers did you get? Have you got a lien?"

"They're all in the safe. Dave put 'em away for me. Dave told me I'd ought to foreclose—then he got down and you know how we been ever since—we ain't had time to think of nothing but keeping this here mill running."

Virgie sighed. "It's my fault, I suppose. I've got to take care of you—just like I've got to take care of Lossie and Lucy out yonder and some more helpless people."

"I got a good piece of money out of that land," Tom defended.

"They defaulted on the contract, didn't they? The company's out of existence. It will take a lawsuit, probably, to repossess it—but somebody's interested in it. I met a couple of men—bankers, they looked like—up on the ridge. They were asking the way to that piece you've got over there—that strip down Hazel Fork with the big poplar on it. You get those papers out, Tom, and let me look into them."

"I ain't never read 'em through." Tom looked frightened already, numbed, left behind by Virgie's breathless attack. To think through a problem was an ordeal for him, to think swiftly agony. "You figure that poplar over yan side the ridge still belongs to me?"

"Who would it belong to?" Virgie demanded. "You contracted to sell it and the contract went by default. You've got a lien or a mortgage or something. Dave must have seen to that. I should have thought about this long ago—but I've had a lot of things on my mind. But now something has to be done."

Tom lumbered out of his chair. There was one kind of action he could understand, indorse, and follow. Strange men had been on his land—land that Virgie said was his.

"I 'low them fellers better keep off, over yonder," he boomed, his eyes dour. "I don't know no law, but

if that's my poplar them bankers better keep off my place."

"Well, you've got to have the papers first. I'll have Lucy open the safe for you."

But when Lucy came back, moon-eyed and absent, with a droop of unhappiness about her mouth, Virgie regarded her with impatience. Lucy had been strung tight as a fiddle lately, making mistakes and being rushingly apologetic about them, jumping when the telephone rang.

Virgie knew what was the matter with Lucy. Young Stanley Daniels was flattered by the sight of Lucy's little silver heart fluttering on her sleeve. He had grown arrogant and cagey.

She had hired young Daniels because he was recommended to be a good chemist and because he was an engaging lad with a university viewpoint, who could give clever answers. But there were, Virgie knew, secret channels in the young man's mind that led ultimately back to a shining pool of vanity. And many things feed vanity, some innocent and some less innocent.

Daniels earned his pay but kept himself remote. He let it be known that he had not sold either his mind or his convictions to Morgan Pulp Company. And that idea flowed back to vanity, too, made an eroded tunnel in which it was possible for dark currents to seep.

A young man with an eager mind so often nowadays set the teeth of that mind into wild meat. And

lately education had gone plunging off to the left, trailing after genius, edged a little past the norm. Knowledge was spiked with challenge till it seethed, a heady brew, so that the youth who drank of it leaped into life half drunk already. And until the cold blast of the material and the obvious sobered them, they saw events at a cockeyed angle, colored with their own egotism.

Young Daniels, Virgie decided, studying the back of Lucy's bent head, needed discipline. Up to now she had found no excuse for working on his suave conceit, but being fond of youth she had not looked diligently. Sooner or later, he was bound to slip. She hoped he would not delay too long for his own good. Give a young chap with a looming bump of self-esteem the idea that he was going good, and ultimately he headed into a grand bust. And busts were expensive to the pulp business.

Lucy needed shaking. So, because she was disgusted with Lucy's meekness, Virgie climaxed a day of exasperations by giving the girl a raise.

"Go out and buy yourself a new hat and some lipstick," she ordered, "and if that young Daniels is hanging on the gate when you start home give him the back of your hand and your chin in the air. I can do all the moping we need in this pulp business."

Lucy was tremulously grateful and husky. "It isn't—that exactly, Mrs. Morgan. It's—oh, everything! Old lamps and the rug wearing out—and food costing so much—"

"I know." Virgie was gentle. "We had a sofa that flopped over and made a bed and my brother had to sleep on it. It was always flopped down in the parlor when I had a beau. Don't let it get you down, Lucy."

"I won't. I promise. Anyway, I have a job—and you're so splendid, Mrs. Morgan!"

"Cat's-foot!" expostulated Virgie. But her irritation had vanished. "Open up the safe after a while and help Tom Pruitt find the papers he's got in there."

At night Joe and Ed reported that the two strangers had walked over Pruitt's land, climbed back into their car, and gone away again. She would hunt up her lawyer, as soon as she had time, Virgie decided, and find out just what could be done for Tom.

Young Mr. Branford Wills was still seriously ill. A half-dozen telegrams had so far failed to locate any one who belonged to him or who might be interested in him. Virgie had that to worry about.

She took time to hope that Lucy had found a decent hat.

She did not know that Lucy was sitting alone at home, among the ravelings, and that Stanley Daniels was, at that moment, occupying a rocker in front of Wallace Withers' old wood-burning stove, smoking one of Wallace's five-cent cigars and thinking very well of himself.

VII

WHEN he let himself go, Wallace Withers was an eloquent man.

He had an idea of turning to the law once; he had had two years in Wofford College, down on the South Carolina side. But his father, unlettered and stubborn, had been unsympathetic with learning; then he had died and left a wide acreage and tangled business concerns for his son, Wallace, to cope with.

But the desire for a public life, for being listened to, had never left Wallace Withers. He loved to hear his own voice editorializing, expounding opinions, setting the world right.

Now he walked up and down his sitting-room, talking as he had not talked in months, his rough hair standing away from his temples, a flush coming and going on his wattled neck.

This young fellow, Daniels, from the Morgan mill, was a flattering auditor. Middle-age is always a trifle flushed and important when youth condescends to listen. Withers was painting a picture of the pulp business—of the Morgan pulp business, as he averred it could be.

Bigger than any of them, tied in with the big Canadian mills, stacks and vats in batteries, timber

rolling in, brown pulp going out by the trainload instead of a single car now and then.

"Dave Morgan was Scotch," he said. "You've heard all this, I reckon?"

"Only briefly." Stanley Daniels deposited the ash of the cigar carefully in the ashpan of the stove, resumed a receptive attitude. "I know so few people in this country."

Withers crossed the room, turned over a book on the table—a stiffly elaborate book that had obviously never been read.

"The Scotch build well, but have no foresight or imagination," he went on. "They want security and they sacrifice other things for it. They let the Irish go prowling around into all the new places, killing off the Injuns, and then along came your Scotchman with a wagonload of goods, for sale, and he took up all the good half-sections. Then they married all the good-looking daughters of the Irish and tamed them down to raise sons to fit this country."

"Maybe they married the Irish girls because, secretly, they wanted to hear somebody laugh," Daniels contributed with a grin.

"Maybe so. Maybe that's why Dave Morgan married Virgie. Her father was a handsome, ne'er-do-well fellow who helped build the railroad in here, made a lot of money, and spent it faster than he made it. But Virgie was a handsome woman when she was young. She's not bad looking now."

"Rather a fine-looking woman now," agreed young Daniels.

"But darned impractical," declared his host. "Reach yourself one of them apples there. They ain't so good this year—no market for 'em to speak of, so I didn't spray. Just a waste of money, I figured. Now, that just illustrates the point I'm making about Virgie Morgan. Virgie would have sprayed them trees and raised some very handsome apples that cost her about six cents apiece, just because she couldn't endure the sight of nubbins. And these here eat just as good if you watch out for the worm-holes. No, Virgie ain't a practical woman. The Irish never are. They're sentimental. Take an Irish farmer—you can tell him anywheres. He'll keep an old cow eating her head off because he's used to the way she bawls, and the feel of her teats. And I'll bet Virgie has got a half dozen no-good hands working in that mill, keeping them on just because they've got young ones or an old mother with dropsy, or something. Or maybe because Dave hired 'em, and she wants to keep his memory green no matter whether she shows any profit or not. Business is getting better fast—but she ain't going to catch up with it."

"Because she turns out a hand-craft product in a machine age," stated Stanley Daniels, much pleased with himself.

"You're kind of smart, ain't you?" Wallace Withers relaxed his long jaw. "I reckon you must

have collected some ideas about making pulp at a profit?" He sat down, laid his long yellow fingers together, drew his upper lip far down, giving his face a little the look of the skull beneath it.

Daniels laughed a trifle nervously. This old geezer had something funny on his mind, obviously; his dry old eyes were full of sly secrets, his knuckles flexed with an involuntary, crushing movement. Stanley Daniels had reserves of his own; a shrewd mind not too much inhibited by scruple. He had determined, early in his career, to get along.

"Well, any young man hates to see a business dragging," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Especially when he sees that that business is standing on its own foot, making its own troubles. That's what's wrong with the world now, Mr. Withers—the young people have the ideas and the ambition and the vision and courage—recklessness, I suppose you would call it—and people your age have all the power and all the money."

Wallace Withers rubbed his chin raspingly. "Well, that's an idea," he admitted.

"It's a truism," insisted his guest. "The trouble with the country is that, owing to the hard times, we haven't sloughed off the top layer. People who should have retired are hanging on, because they haven't the money to feel safe on. So all the rest of us, down below, are tramped down. We can't rise—we can't get ahead, till the older people quit."

"Some people," Withers said, "would call you a

young fool. But I don't. I'm a thinking man. Personally, I'd like to see what you'd do—running the Morgan mill."

Daniels laughed. "That," he said, "would be a grand idea—but just about as hopeless as most grand ideas. Mrs. Morgan isn't going to surrender the control of that mill to anybody."

Withers did not answer for a moment. The stove clinked, a mouse crept out from beneath an old organ, gave a bright-eyed, terrified look about, scurried back again.

"Virgie Morgan don't own all the stock in that mill," he said, looking straight ahead. "There's some of it loose—and a lot of things could happen. Things might happen so that more of it could be had. She ain't got any considerable reserve, I know that. I know how she's fixed. If trouble was to happen in the mill or orders fell off, she'd be hard put to raise the money to carry on. It might be kind of hard on her to lose control—but in the end it would be good for the business."

Stanley Daniels felt a sudden surge of wry distaste. His tongue tasted of copper, his ears buzzed faintly. So this old hick had ideas in his ratty brain, did he? Trick stuff, likely. He had suspected it. The old geezer was too darned friendly, too quick to take up with a total stranger. It was all there, in his lean, unpleasant face; the drag of claws in his voice, licking his lips as though he tasted blood.

Let him pull his own potatoes out of the fire, then.

Daniels felt very noble and superior as he stood up, pulled down his coat.

"Well, this has been very pleasant, Mr. Withers. But I'm a working man. I'd better say good night."

Withers collected his limbs and scrambled out of the chair.

"But wait a minute—you ain't going to walk? I was figuring on taking you back—car's standing outside. There ain't any hurry—not nine o'clock yet. Just eight thirty-eight." His heavy watch thudded back into his vest. He was unbalanced and annoyed by this abrupt switching of the subject.

"I think I'd like the walk." Daniels was smooth, impersonal, inscrutable. "Need the exercise."

"Thunder—it's most five miles. I'll run you down to the main road anyway. You can walk from there if you're itching for air."

Air. That was what Stanley Daniels felt the need for. His overcoat on, his hatbrim snapped down, the door open, he felt honest again. He had had a hunch all along that this dry-eyed old guy was figuring on using him somehow. What made him hasten to be out in the wholesome air again was the awareness that he had been ready to hear Withers' schemes.

He had no inner hypocrisy. He knew that no loyalty would ever blind him to his own advantage. But he did not like being maneuvered, so he sat a little stiffly and replied in polite monosyllables to Withers' remarks, as they drove the rutty road to the highway.

Withers' crudeness had offended the esthete in him; he wanted skill in craft, shrewdness, a clever build-up. And he knew that he was not afraid of Withers. He was afraid of himself.

He walked rapidly till he reached the outskirts of the village, his nostrils stinging in the frosty air. The town lay on a slope where the river widened, and as Daniels approached it the linked lights made it look like some jeweled ornament on the breast of the mountain.

He considered the small gleams farther up the hill and decided which spark shone from the Morgan house. A white house—standing up there, aloofly, with the door closed fast. Studding that valley floor a hundred houses with closed doors, shutting the world out. He should feel lonely, excluded, but somehow he did not. Even as a little fellow he had been remarkably self-sufficient, a trifle arrogant, made solitary by the cruel itching of ambitions that he could not share because they were not always kind and were almost never generous.

The streets of the town were empty and chill as he came down into them. The single policeman stood inside the drug-store, looking out through the steamy glass in the door. A half-dozen cars were parked in front of the moving-picture theater. The girl in the ticket booth had her fur collar turned up and the semicircular opening before her stopped with a piece of corrugated board. Daniels studied the lurid posters and walked away.

He would go down to the mill, he decided. The air was keen and he should be certain that his tests were all right. A freeze would ruin several days' work.

At the mill he moved in authority and this pleased his young vanity. The men he spoke to had to listen. The forms that went out of his laboratory were commands; on them depended the quality of the Morgan pulp.

Only a few men were at the mill—the few who tended the processes that went on night and day. Daniels unlocked his laboratory, a tacked-on structure half brick, half wood, sheeted with metal. He snapped on the light, unlocked the cupboard where he kept his apparatus. His test-tubes, he saw, were all in good order, the thermometer stood at a safe temperature, and the rusty steam-pipe running along the wall was warm.

He put out the light again, locked the place. Then he saw that a light was burning in the office. It was after ten. Mrs. Morgan must be there. Lucy would not come down at night alone. She never came at night.

He stepped up to the office window and saw that the person inside was old Tom Pruitt.

Pruitt's status at the mill had always puzzled young Daniels. He knew that Pruitt had worked there since the plant was built, that he was always carrying messages from Virgie Morgan, giving orders that she initiated, yet he had apparently no defi-

nite position and no authority. He was not a foreman or a superintendent yet he combined these two offices in a vague fashion, without being actually in charge of any operation or at the head of any group of employees. Men who wanted anything from Mrs. Morgan, whether it was a cog-gear or a loan to pay for a new baby, went to Tom Pruitt. Tom went to Mrs. Morgan.

Such loose organization irritated Daniels. A business, in his opinion, should be run like a business. This business was run like a family, with Mrs. Morgan the matriarch and Tom Pruitt a sort of slow-moving, stubborn hired man.

Daniels opened the office door. "Hello, Tom," he said, "anything wrong?"

Tom Pruitt looked up from Virgie's desk, where was spread out a loose array of legal-looking papers.

He looked baffled, his hair was standing up, but he grinned at Daniels. "Nope—nothing special. I'm studying out this here. Never did see such fine printing nor so much writing that didn't make head nor tail. You know anything about this here business?"

"Let's look at it." Stanley Daniels slid out of his overcoat.

"You gotta know something about law, I reckon." Tom got up gratefully, surrendered his chair. "I've kept shy of the law for fifty year but now it looks like it caught up with me at last. I own stuff and I don't own it. Take a look at all them and see what you make out of it. I've done give up."

Daniels sat down at the desk briskly and unfolded one document after another, read them through, with Tom looking over his shoulder, his amazement growing.

"How about these contracts, Pruitt? They paid you, did they?"

"Not since '26, they didn't. They didn't pay in five years, nor in seven neither. They ain't paid nothing since that paper was wrote."

"You should file suit then—get your land back."

"Yeah—she said that, too—Mis' Morgan. She said I'd ought to go to law. She wants me to hire that feller Willis Pratt. I was just studying about it. Pratt will want a lot of money for nothing, I reckon—them lawyers always do."

"But—that land must have been worth money. How much have you got, anyway?"

"Upwards of a thousand acres—mountain land. Never could raise nothing on it—too slanchwise. Couldn't raise a cuss-fight on it if the timber was took off."

"And these"—Daniels snapped a rubber band about the thick bundle of certificates—"ought to be in a safety deposit box in the bank. I didn't know you owned this big block of stock in the mill. You're a rich man, Pruitt—I'm glad I know you."

"Rich? Me?" Old Tom rubbed his ear. "I just got me a piece of this mill, that's all. Dave Morgan and me worked mighty hard to keep this mill goin'—"

and I been workin' harder since Dave died. No, I ain't rich. I got no wish to be rich."

"Ever draw any dividends on this stock? Any money for your piece of the mill?"

Tom shook his head. "We agreed not to take out nothing, Mis' Morgan and me. We pay ourselves off every pay-day, just wages. I got all I need. It takes the rest to keep them presses rolling and the hands working. We're both satisfied."

"But you ought to get that land back. You ought to file a claim right away."

"Yeah—I reckon so. Reckon I'll have to get me a lawyer though I sure do hate to pay out money to that Willis Pratt. One that wrote them there papers out charged a plenty, but I didn't have to pay it—them Phillipises done that."

"You could sell some of your stock, if you need money. That stuff is as good as cash, you know."

"No—nope. I don't aim to sell none. I figure to hang on to that. I'll save up the money. I got a little saved already." Old Tom locked the safe carefully, wiped off the shining knobs with a blue handkerchief.

"Well, good night." Daniels put on his coat, went out.

He walked away slowly, but his thoughts were racing. Wallace Withers' words came back to his mind. Virgie Morgan, so the dry old man had said, did not own all the stock of the mill. There was a block of

stock loose—and now Stanley Daniels knew where that stock was. In the hands of ignorant old Tom Pruitt who had no idea of its value or importance—Tom Pruitt, who was rich and did not know it!

VIII

BRANFORD WILLS improved rapidly. His breathing ceased to rasp through the room and, though his voice was little more than a reedy croak, his cracked lips managed to frame a scrap of a smile whenever Marian Morgan came into view.

For days, while Wills was ill, Marian had been strangely gentle and quiet and concerned. Born electrical, difficult, and with a dainty chip forever poised on her shoulder, she was troubled by this new uncertainty that came over her whenever she took her turn at watching in the sick-room. And when Wills's eyes lost the vagueness of fever and began to survey the scene with new, masculine interest, she withdrew a little, turned tart and airy, though whenever she hurled an acid barb her heart recoiled as though the point had pierced herself.

And Wills refused to be humble. He had, so he had told Virgie several times, an insurance policy that would take care of the expense of this illness. He was profoundly grateful but there was dignity in his attitude. He would not fawn nor placate—and the indomitable fire in Marian crackled against the cool steel of his assurance, till sparks flew far and wide.

"Do we have to keep up this war interminably?" Wills asked, with his crooked smile, on a sleepy night when the fire and the snugly curtained windows were very cosy.

Marian, sitting small and dark before the blaze, pushed back her chair and tilted her chin.

"I didn't start the war. It has been going on for ages. Ever since George Vanderbilt decided that the way to save the timber from the ruthless depredators was to give the forests to the Government. Since then, every government man who comes along assumes that mother is out to despoil the nation and rob generations of little children of their rightful heritage. You're only typical. You can't help being what you are."

"You," said Wills, picking a drinking tube off the table and blowing through it, "*can* help being what you are!"

"What am I?"

"Cayenne—on ice-cream. A chocolate éclair with dynamite inside. You're sweet really—but so darned afraid somebody will find it out that you go popping off like a machine-gun—shooting blanks!"

"I hate chocolate éclairs!" Marian drawled scornfully. "Even with T.N.T. inside they'd be sickening. Did any one ever tell you that you were a conceited young man?"

"Frequently. But I'm obtuse. Like most government men. Did any one ever tell you that you have nice eyes?"

"Frequently."

"I thought I had discovered something."

"As a discoverer you belong to the school of Mr. Christopher Columbus. He didn't know where he was going, either."

"But when he got there he was satisfied that he had found something swell—wherever it was."

"You must have been chagrined—stumbling into this house! Have you sent your apologies to your employers for fraternizing with the robber baroness and her ghoulish child?"

"Go on! Rub it in. I'm down. I'm prostrate—body and mind. Could I have a drink of water before the lady with the sniffles comes back?"

"What's the matter with Ada? She gives you worshipful looks. And she can look up Cancer in the sign of Taurus or whatever it is and tell you exactly what day you should shave off those whiskers."

"I hope the sign's right to-morrow." He rubbed his chin ruefully. "This alfalfa has me sunk under an inferiority complex, nine feet thick."

"My father had a razor." Marian jumped up. "Andrew used to shave him. I'll call Andrew."

Lossie raised objections when she went down to the kitchen. "You'd better not let Andrew shave that feller if he's got fever, I tell you. It'll strike in sure."

"Oh, bosh, Lossie. You and your superstitions."

"I told Andrew the hog meat would all shrivel and worms get into it if he butchered in the dark of

the moon, didn't I? Well, look at how it came out."

Virgie Morgan observed her daughter, with a dry and quizzical smile on her face.

In a world where she walked in mastery, meeting bankers and bark-choppers on their own ground, Virgie was abashed only by her own daughter. Marian could make her aware that her hair-pins were loose and that she needed to buy a better fitting corset.

Virgie liked young Wills, but she kept a still tongue around the house and watched Marian with wise amused eyes. But when Tom made remarks at the office she cut him off curtly.

"Ain't that feller never going?" Tom demanded. "He hit it pretty soft, looks to me. Good thing he didn't knock on my door. Ain't no soft bed in my shanty. If I want to move all I got to do is put out the fire and call the dog."

"That's your torn-down stinginess!" Virgie snapped. "You don't need to live like white trash, Tom Pruitt! Have you taken those papers up to Pratt like I told you to?"

"No'm." Tom was swiftly meek. "I ain't had time."

"If you lose everything that rightfully belongs to you it's nobody's fault but your own."

"Bill Gallup was over—from the power-house. He said he wanted to see you."

"Bill always wants to see me. He wants me to junk a good steam plant, that's been turning this mill

for twenty years, and put in motors. I don't blame Bill. He's a smart young fellow trying to get along."

She went home tired, out of patience with Tom and his affairs and a little out of patience with herself. Marian was right. She ought not to be trailing around in the wet woods, doing man-chores, things she had kept on doing because David had always done them.

Her throat was raw and burned now, from exposure and wet feet. Marian had said that a woman in her position ought to have more pride, and that was true, too. David had kept his hand on every operation of the mill, kept the plant going on the old hand-craft system of the ancient guild. But David had been a man—and those days were passing.

What she needed, she had been telling herself for days, was a young man to take over a lot of this responsibility that was getting her down. Tom was all right so far as his ability went but the slightest acceleration of pace left Tom hopelessly behind. He was still living and working in a day when the men had carried pulp out of the warehouses on their backs. He could not keep step. He liked to spend a whole morning tinkering with a fifty-cent lock on an oil house. He was getting old.

"Not that I'm so young any more myself," Virgie humored her rheumatic twinges, "but I haven't begun to collect moss on the north side of me."

"Hello," she said, as she entered the sick-room. "How does life look this morning? Any brighter?"

Mr. Wills turned on his engaging and gallant grin.

"Swell," he croaked in his husky whisper.

"He et all his breakfast," beamed Ada Clark, "and he's only got one degree. I took it twice to see."

"Go on down and eat, Ada," Virgie ordered. "I'll sit here a few minutes."

Ada departed and young Wills followed her starched back with an impish grimace. "The stars," he said, "are propitious to-day. Virgo just looked it up in the book."

"Too bad something propitious doesn't happen to poor Ada. A widower with six children would be just grand. Look here, I sent her out because I want to talk to you." Virgie edged her rocker nearer the bed. "Do you still think the pulp people are the despoilers of the earth?"

"Do you have to keep rubbing it in, all the time? I'm so low now I could walk out of this room without opening the door. You've been so fine to me, Mrs. Morgan, that I'm keeping on living just to pay you back. I might be lying over there in the laurel now, like that poor photographer."

"You got yourself out of the laurel. I didn't. And I didn't take you in for pay. I'm a mountain woman. What I want to talk to you about is, what comes next. What do you figure you'll do when you get loose from Ada and the zodiac?"

He wrinkled his forehead and his dry lips straightened. "I'll go back to Washington, probably. If I have any job left there. I hope I won't be a nuisance

to you much longer—and I have to pay, you know—this nurse and the doctor.”

“I wish you’d hush up about paying and let me say what I want to say before Ada bounces back. You say you may not have any job in Washington. If you had a job here do you suppose you could stand it—or would it be too painful to you to work for pulp people?”

He clutched the mattress, turning on his shoulder, dull color burning in his face.

“You mean—you’d give me a job—after—”

“I haven’t said so, directly. I’m just speculating. I’m trying to be too many people. It won’t work. I’m old but I know the advantage that youth has. I can’t buy youth back for myself—but maybe I can buy it, to let it work for me. I’ve been thinking about that.”

“You,” he said hoarsely, “are the youngest person that I know. And the finest.”

“Thanks for that. I know how you mean it. I know blarney when I hear it, but I know sincerity, too. I might figure out a job for you if you want to be thinking about it. I’m not promising. I’m just getting this business now to where we can do something besides hang on with our toe-nails and teeth. I couldn’t pay very much and I’d work you hard. I work myself hard. There’s no mercy in me. I’m a hard old woman, but I’m fair. But—I’m going places with my mill—and I’d take the people along who work for me and play fair with me. Don’t make up your mind suddenly—mine isn’t made up yet.”

"I think that I'd rather work for you than for anybody I've ever met," he said, "but I might not be much use."

"People who work for me have to be of use." Virgie rose, briskly, and gave her corset the usual disciplinary jerk. "I'm going to be hard to work for. Times are improving—that means we're going to have more people to fight. The minute you begin to look a little prosperous a lot of people begin figuring on how they can take some of it away from you. That's begun already. I've got enemies—and stupid friends can be worse than enemies. More dangerous. Well, good-by—I'd better get to work. You'll have a quiet day. Lossie's got washing to do and Marian is organizing the Little Theatre."

"Your child," said Mr. Wills, "does not like me."

"There are times," Virgie grinned dryly, "when she doesn't admire me a whole lot, but maybe we'll grow in grace. She's a good kid though—not spoiled. She knows what she wants but generally it makes fair sense. Oh, hello, Ada—you keep that east window up a couple of inches, now. Put your sweater on if you get chilly and don't talk all day. Let this patient sleep."

She went downstairs and out to her muddy old car. She was wondering, as she drove toward the town if she had been a sentimental old fool. Tom would say so—and so would Marian. But Marian had had the idea in the first place.

She did need help—and here was this young chap,

trained in engineering and free and footloose, glad probably of anything that would offer permanence. Government work was stop-gap work, expedient stuff for these young men; they grabbed at it because nothing else offered in a world knocked cock-eyed by weird readjustments, but it was always temporary in their minds—which was not so good for the Government. "Like running a billion-dollar business with a lot of journeyman tramps," Virgie thought. "Transient business. But that's the way most of it's run. Even Congress. All working with one eye and half their minds on something else. Set to jump and run."

She said nothing to Tom about young Branford Wills. Tom wanted to carry on the pulp business with a double-bitted ax and a wheelbarrow. He was rooted, hating change, fearing it. She was exasperated with him anyway.

Her exasperation increased when she found Bill Gallup waiting for her. Lucy was typing at a furious pace, as she always did whenever a man sat in the chair beside Virgie's desk.

"Hello, Bill," she said, as she spiked her limp hat and bumped her brief-case down. "Are you back again to try to talk me into throwing away a good old boiler that has been tooting our whistle for going on thirty years?"

"No." Bill punched out a cigarette. "I'd like to see that ancient kettle go into scrap, of course, and you've got to come to it sooner or later. But I'll wait.

Wait till a couple of engineers and a fireman or two go out through that rusty roof of yours. But that isn't what's on my mind to-day. I wanted to talk about a tract of hardwood timber over across the ridge on Little Fork. I found out that Pruitt has a first-mortgage lien on it."

"What about it?"

"Some eastern timber grabbers are after it. Fellow named Cragg stayed at my house last night. I heard, after he left, that they have raided a piece already over on the Tennessee side—moved in and cut it off quick before the different claimants could get together and get court action. They have papers usually that will hold water—stand off the courts for a while. Then they settle for about a tenth of what the timber's worth—and leave the land worthless."

Virgie had not sat down. Her mobile face had stiffened into grim lines.

"Lucy! Get Willis Pratt on the line. Tell him to get over here right away. And then go out in the mill and find Tom Pruitt. Tell him I want him—quick."

Willis Pratt was not in his office. He was, so Lucy reported, after much telephoning, over at the county-seat trying a case concerning a cow hit by a switch engine.

Virgie and Tom and young Bill Gallup sat for an hour in the office, looking at each other, Tom un-

easily and unhappily, Virgie with an accusing grimness about the set of her mouth, young Bill too interested to depart.

"If they get into that timber before you can get an injunction, Tom Pruitt, and make it stick," Virgie said, savagely, "it's your own fault for being so dumb."

"They'll probably have some sort of order—from the receiver or somebody. Money fixes that up. Cragg said himself that the standing stuff on that one piece was worth a fortune."

"What kind of fellow was this Cragg?" Virgie demanded. "Little gray mustache? Big black car?"

"That's him," said Bill, ungrammatically.

"Then they're the ones were up on this side the other day. I saw them. They must be figuring on stripping the whole tract."

Tom said nothing. He rose and jammed on his old hat.

"You come back here!" Virgie shrilled at him. "We're going to wait here for Willis Pratt. Lucy got a call through."

But Tom did not turn back nor answer. He went across the yard and out the gate, along a hard path by the railroad tracks. The path turned sharply up a gullied hill through a gap in an old fence and Tom turned, too, heading for the little unpainted house on a knob behind the town, where for forty years he had lived.

He unlocked the heavy padlock and opened the door, into a wide, dark room that smelled of ashes and unaired clothing and ancient grease.

Over the fireplace hung two long rifles, polished and shining in a place where nothing else was clean. Tom took them both down, opened a tin safe, and brought out oil and rags and a slim ramrod.

He was a mountain man.

IX

THREE days passed and Tom did not come back.

Virgie grew anxious and irritable, snapping at every one, exasperated at Tom.

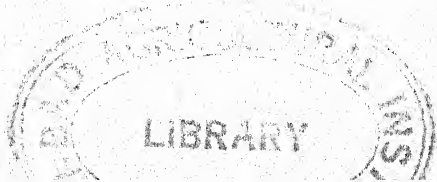
"The contrary old mule!" she stormed, as she poked at the fire. "What's he pouting about, anyway? After I go to a lot of trouble to save his timber land for him, he goes off in a sulk! Afraid he'll have to go to court, I suppose. That Pittsboro stuff ought to be out and half-way to Potomac yards by now—and there they are out there, blundering around, the car not loaded yet."

Lucy Fields, sitting meekly at her desk, chirped an agreement. "Do you want me to go to Tom's house, Mrs. Morgan, and see what has happened to him?"

"No, I don't. It's a mile and all uphill. You'll go traipsing around in that thin coat and get pneumonia, and then where will I be? I haven't got enough trouble, shipments late and stove full of ashes—"

"I'll have Jerry clean those out. They were so busy in the yard I hated to stop them."

"Let Jerry alone. And don't pay any attention to me either. I'm tired. I'm going to have a man around here to take some of this work off my shoulders. I've hired that young Wills up at my house, to start



in Monday. He ought to be well enough by that time. You can tell the boys he's going to work here. Well, what are you looking like that for?"

Lucy's face had changed oddly. Her sensitive mouth had straightened and stiffened a little, her eyes looked frightened first and then withdrew and were guarded and unhappy.

"What's on your mind?" Virgie persisted. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't hire a man to get timber in and pulp out and go wading around in wet woods, instead of doing it myself?"

"None at all, Mrs. Morgan." Lucy's voice was small and prim. "I was just thinking—I was wondering if the boys in the mill were going to like having a stranger put over them—an outsider."

"I put Daniels in there—and he's an outsider. Nobody objected to him."

"It's not quite the same, Mrs. Morgan. Frank Emmet and Jerry and the others know that they can't run the laboratory and make tests. But they can get the timber in and the pulp out."

Virgie's broad, amiable face burned with crimson patches and her eyes were as metallic as gun sights.

"Listen, here!" she said, grimly. "If you hear any remarks around this property about who's hired or who isn't, you tell those hillbillies I'm running this mill, will you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Morgan."

"And for gosh sakes," Virgie fairly snorted, "don't be so darned humble!"

"I won't, Mrs. Morgan."

"Get Perry Bennett on the telephone. Tell him I want an answer about that spruce acreage to-day."

"He told Tom he had decided not to sell."

"He always decides not to sell. Then he boggles around and devils my life out of me to get the price up. But he always sells. I don't know why I fool with him, except that we need that acreage. Our stuff over the ridge will be hard to get out when it thaws up later. I'm going up after Tom myself. I've got things to say to him, anyway. Tell Perry Bennett if he wants to talk to me to come over here."

Lucy Fields went home that night in an uneasy state of mind. She had worked for and loved Virgie Morgan loyally for several years, she would have defended Virgie passionately against any criticism, but now she had a feeling that Virgie's generous impulses had betrayed her. This young Wills might be a very fine fellow—but Lucy had a feeling that he would not be a success in the Morgan mill.

Stanley Daniels was coming to call. She would talk to him about it. But she was quite certain that he was not going to be pleased either.

But at night when she went home, she forgot Branford Wills in her excitement over Daniels' visit.

The house was in confusion, as always. Lucy hurried from room to room, opening the outer doors to get the smell of coffee and frying out of the house; ignoring her mother's peevish complaints, whisking and brushing, hiding away the bottle of liniment, the

lurid calendars, and the handleless souvenir tea-cup filled with matches that decorated the mantel shelf.

She washed up the dust of spilled ashes and brought out the two precious embroidered pillows she had worked in lonely evenings.

"Anybody'd think some king was coming!" protested Mrs. Fields peevishly from the dishpan. "You're the one that's always complaining about coal costing so much, and now you're trying to heat up a whole county. I reckon I'll have one of my stiff necks to-morrow."

"Fresh air never hurt anybody, Mother. Why you don't die in this stuffy place, shut up all day, is a mystery. And is there any reason why that cat can't lie on the floor where cats belong? Or stay in one chair, at least?"

"You leave my cat alone! He's my company. I could go stark, staring crazy sitting here alone day in and day out if I didn't have my cat to talk to. He's got good sense—good as most people and better than some I know. Just because you've got a beau coming—"

"He isn't my beau. Can't I have one friend without a lot of excitement and hysteria over it? Other girls have company and go out places—"

"They don't tear the house down to please their company, I'll bet! Is there enough cold air in here now to suit your elegant gentleman? This dish-water will be froze solid in a minute."

Lucy closed the doors with a patient sigh. There

was little use, the sigh said, trying to be anybody. Stanley Daniels would look at all her pathetic artifices—the rug pulled a little crooked to cover a hole in the old carpet, the picture hung too high to hide the stain on the wall-paper. He would be amused. But at least he was coming. He had stopped at the office to tell her so, and she had to hurry to press her good dress and be ready.

The dress was old but the soft shade of blue helped the paleness of Lucy's coloring, and the lace bow she contrived at the throat had an air. Her hair fluffed softly over her ears and the dab of rouge she put on made her eyes brighter.

"Well," remarked Mrs. Fields, hanging up her apron, "having a feller sets you up. You look real nice."

"I'm going to fix cocoa ready to heat, Mother, and put the cups on the tray. And, Mother, please—please don't nibble at these little cakes. I couldn't get many. It's almost a week till pay-day."

"I wouldn't touch one of 'em with the broom handle!" Mrs. Fields was offended. "And one thing I'm bound to say. If you aim to get married, leave me alone here in my own house. I can live on corn-pone and greens, I can chop my own stove wood if it comes down to that, but I can't stand being fussed at. And there can't nobody fix me over. I'm too old." She sniffed audibly and marched into the bedroom, her neck stiff.

Lucy flew to the door. "Mother—if you dare

suggest such a thing—I haven't the slightest idea of marrying anybody! My heavens, can't a girl have company in her own house without all this racket? If you talk about me getting married before him—Mother, I'll leave! I swear I will!" She choked on her weak anger, let despair sink heavily into the bottom of her heart. It was no use—no use at all!

"Well, that's him a-knocking," stated her mother with acerbity. "You better let him in—unless you figure on leaving right away."

Stanley Daniels had a new overcoat and a jaunty new gray felt hat. Lucy let him in with a flutter, wishing that her throat would not get so pathetically red. She reached for the hat but Daniels did not surrender it.

"I was sent to bring you," he said. "They're having some kind of a meeting—going to get up a show. Marian Morgan told me to bring you."

"Oh—the Little Theatre. I heard about it. That will be fun. Wait till I put on my coat." Lucy hurried away thankfully.

She set her hat at a reckless angle, brushed on another touch of rouge, was ready, marched out with her head tilted and a little smile, ignoring her mother's parting admonition shrilled from the bedroom.

"You better put a sweater on under that coat. You ain't got any long underwear on."

All the way to the lodge hall, where the meeting was to be held, she walked on air. Oh, this was

living—this was being young! Going out, meeting young people, having fun. Stanley Daniels would be the best-looking man there. He had a flair, a city polish, that the small-town boys lacked. He was sure, easy, even a little insolent. He would make the world give him what he wanted, he would not always be a laboratory worker in a mill.

And he did like her. Nothing silly—she hated that stuff. Necking in cars, drinking out of boys' flasks, all the cheap things some of the other girls did. But he waited for her every night, and Jerry and Hobe and the men thought she was Daniels' girl. It pleased her secretly to have them think so.

They passed the mill and the sulphurous reek settled like a cloud over them. Daniels said, "Have I smelled something like that before? Is it roses, do you think?"

Lucy giggled with delight. "I never notice it any more. I went away to business college for a while and when I came back it seemed dreadful, but since I work in it I think if the mill shut down I'd miss it. Probably I wouldn't be able to breathe at all."

"Like David Morgan. You've heard that story, I suppose?"

Lucy had heard the story of the night the pipe froze and David Morgan leaped up and was half-way to town in three minutes, pulling on his clothes as he ran. It was a classic in the town, but she said naively, "Oh, no. What happened?"

"Too bad Morgan died," Daniels remarked when

he had related the old tale. "That mill needs a man. Not that Mrs. Morgan isn't a grand woman, of course. But any business needs a man."

Lucy gasped a little, because here was the opening she needed, the chance to talk over what was bothering her mind. Now she could say, "Oh, but there will be a man. Mr. Branford Wills." But somehow she could not say it. She sensed that Stanley Daniels was not going to like the news when he heard it; that he would stiffen and grow thoughtful and remote, that this lovely evening would be spoiled. So she kept silent though the silence troubled her. Keeping anything from Daniels was like cheating to her naïvely honest mind. And there was, deep in her mind, a traitorous small tingle of excitement that she would not have admitted even to herself.

Having a young man in the mill—some one new and enthusiastic and impatient—was going to be something of a thrill. Lucy glowed a little with this idea as she went up the cold, clacking stairs to the lodge room. And there the drabness of reality chilled her again as Marian Morgan, brisk and assured, said, "Hello, Lucy," in the same old tone of kind indifference.

Instantly Lucy was just Lucy Fields again. Lucy Fields who lived in the shabby house at the end of a shabby street, who had a dreary time of it, supporting her mother.

Marian said, "Sit down. You know all these people, Lucy?"

And Lucy murmured, "Oh, yes," and settled herself for an evening of pure torment.

Sally Gallup, wife of young Bill who ran the power-plant over the mountain, was there, brisk and sophisticated and wearing the little air of personal triumph that young married women flaunt for the express torture of spinsters. Sally announced that under no circumstances would she agree to be a leading lady.

"It spoils the illusion for the audience, knowing that the heroine is really the wife of a perfectly solid husband. I can't enjoy some of my favorite movie stars any more, knowing they're probably worrying about Junior's tonsils while they're making love in the play. You'll have to be the heroine, Marian. Could you play the male lead, Mr. Daniels, if we find the right play?"

"I've never tried acting—" Daniels hesitated, but obviously, Lucy saw, he was pleased.

"You've such a grand voice—and you're tall," Sally Gallup continued to effervesce. "You'd make a wonderful actor."

Marian Morgan said nothing. "She wants Bry Hutton for the lead," Lucy was thinking, "and the others will be against it for fear Bry will be drunk at the last minute and spoil the show."

"We have to organize first," Marian announced, "and appoint committees. We'll have to write and find out about plays. We can't pay any big royalty. If we charge even so much as fifty cents people will

grumble and go to the movies instead. Lucy, you can write and find out about the plays. You're writing letters every day. I'll speak to mother about it."

"Oh, yes," Lucy hated her own faint acquiescence, "I can do that."

They all left the hall in a group and Lucy had a moment of panic for fear Stanley Daniels might leave her to walk home with some of the others. But he kept his hand on her elbow and her spirits rose. The three blocks home were too pitifully short. A thin moon was rising and the wind was raw but Lucy would have walked to the Morgan house on the side of the mountain, gladly—she would have walked to the county-seat, though her shoes did not fit any too well.

She would, she told herself, keep a wary eye on the clerical end of the Little Theatre enterprise. She would persuade them to leave the ordering of the plays to her, and if any of the dramatic literature submitted for approval had too much romance and fervor in it, she would manage somehow to sidetrack that particular opus.

At the door she grew nervous again, hated her stammering uncertainty.

"Won't you come in?" she faltered. "I'm hungry, aren't you? This air is so chilly—"

Stanley Daniels hesitated briefly. His ego had been given a satisfying lift at the meeting by Sally Gallup's fulsomeness. Even Marian Morgan's lack of enthusiasm had failed to dampen him. He had

written Marian down long ago as a prickly, brainless brat, who was a trial to her mother. They had had one or two encounters at the mill and he had kept a comfortable feeling of having come off winner on these occasions. Marian had no irony and no skill—only angers. Stanley Daniels had developed control to a shrewd degree. As with old Wallace Withers, he let people talk themselves out, then ended the interview on an aloof and indefinite note of casual condescension that left an uncomfortable doubt hanging in mid-air.

He was only half aware of the devilish efficacy of this system, bred of his own conceit, but he saw the mechanics of it in action, working smoothly, and that was enough. But eager little Lucy fed some gnawing bit of uncertainty in his nature. He still felt the need of approval and Lucy was naively adoring. So he was gracious about letting her urge him into the house, and kind in ignoring her confusion when they entered.

Mrs. Fields's shoes and woolen stockings were sitting in front of the stove and Daniels busied himself tactfully folding his overcoat, while Lucy whisked them away. He did not see Lucy snatch a glass containing an upper set of teeth from the mantel, or turn a cushion swiftly because of the inevitable cat-chairs clinging to it.

"I'll make some chocolate." Lucy was a little breathless. "This chair is more comfortable, I'm sure."

"Can I help?" Daniels offered.

"Oh, no, I couldn't think of it." Lucy laughed quickly. "I'm old-fashioned, you see. I belong to that vanishing race of women who think that men should be waited upon."

Never could she let him see the inside of that dreadful old kitchen. The old wood stove, the smoked kettle and rusty pipe, the smoky little two-burner kerosene contraption they used in summer.

She lit this affair now, to heat the cocoa, carefully closing the door so its smudgy smell would not penetrate the other room. The little cups were pretty. She had bought them hopefully, and kept them now in her trunk, after having found one on the back porch with medicine in it, mixed for a sick hen. She had crocheted the lacy edge of the napkins and ironed them to a gloss.

Everything was delicate and pleasing—even Marian Morgan herself could not have arranged a daintier tray.

The she lifted the lid of the cake box and exclaimed in sudden dismay, "Oh—mean! Oh, what shall I do?"

Mrs. Fields had eaten all the little cakes.

X

EVEN before he was able to stand alone without wavering, Branford Wills knew that he was falling in love with Marian Morgan.

The realization troubled him. He was under deep obligation to Virgie. She had, he knew, saved his life by taking him in, by the care he had had when illness laid him low. To repay that debt by falling in love with Virgie's child, especially now that Virgie was also to be his employer, seemed a left-handed and slightly dubious procedure—but there was no help for it. He looked himself in the face in the mirror and told the haggard vision he saw there that he was lost.

Marian's very aloofness, her odd, prickly, half-sweet, half-bitter withdrawing, the secret and judging quality that lived in her dark eyes and hid in her long lashes, made her an enigma, a challenging mystery to dare any man with blood in his veins. And Branford Wills was young and fiercely proud and adventurous.

His pride was what bothered him. As he stood, erect finally and shaving himself with a rather uncertain hand before the mirror in his room, he told himself grimly that no one, least of all the girl her-

self, should ever guess the state of his feelings until he could look Virgie Morgan calmly in the face, a man on his own, worth what he was paid and able to love a woman without apology or without humility.

So whenever Marian came near, he kept the conversation on the brittle, half-bantering, half-contemptuous strain that modern youth assumes, choosing it for sophistication, hiding any current of feeling, masking every emotion. And so soon as he could mount the stairs without staggering, he rented a room in the house of Ada Clark's mother, and prepared to move.

"I have to do this. You understand," he said to Virgie.

"Yes," she said, "I understand."

"I have a stiff-necked sort of pride that has to stand alone," Wills went on. "You've been wonderful to me. And now you've given me a job. So—I have to stand on my own—show you that I was worth troubling over."

"That won't make me mad," Virgie declared. "I like pride. We could use some more of it in this country. A lot more of it. These mountains were settled by a proud people who wanted freedom and independence. Most of them had been getting along on the same patch of ground for four or five generations till this relief business came along. Now I can hardly get a man to do a day's work. They're so afraid something free will be handed out while they're up in the woods cutting top stuff for me,

that I can't pry one of 'em loose from that bench over by the depot."

"I haven't anything to pack," he said, "so I might as well go. I have to send some wires and locate my belongings. I'll report for work on Monday. And I'll earn whatever you pay me."

"You'll earn it, all right." Virgie was terse. "I had to give up philanthropy after three banks had busted in my face. People who work for me have to produce."

To Marian, Wills pitched his farewell speech in another key.

"I'm about to depart hence," he remarked, walking into the little room at the foot of the stairs which had once been David Morgan's private lair. "My obnoxious person is about to be removed from your vicinity. Then you can smile and be lightsome and gay once more."

Marian looked up from the letter she was writing. A quick little shadow moved over her face, her eyes darkened, and her lips caught on a half-open, incredulous question. Then her composure returned, cool and indomitable, and she looked like David Morgan again, like the young, stern photograph of him on the old desk.

"Well—good-by," she said, getting to her feet. "I suppose it would be too much for you to tell them in Washington that we are really fairly decent people, if we do mill pulp."

"I'm not going to Washington. I'm staying here."

An older man, a wiser man would have caught the light that flamed up briefly behind her eyes, noted the quick little catch of her breath. But Branford Wills was young and not terribly wise. Also he was blinded by that peculiar masculine pride which will not go courting till it can march arrogantly, clanking spurs and offering gifts.

"Oh—so you're staying here." Marian's voice wavered ever so little.

"I'm going to work in the Morgan mill. Didn't your mother tell you?"

"No," she said slowly, "she didn't tell me."

She stood waiting, with the old desk where David Morgan had kept his dusty piles of letters and his stacked trade papers, with David Morgan's photograph—steely-eyed and with a fierce, handle-bar mustache—behind her, as the tradition of the Morgan mill and the Morgan money was behind her. It was a little like standing on a proud mountain, disdaining all below, but Marian was not thinking of that because at that moment a white pain had her by the throat.

There had been an hour—but of course Wills had been desperately ill then and sick men are unaccountable—but there had been an hour of dusk and quietness, when she had been keeping watch and Wills had caught her hand in his hot, twitching fingers and told her that her voice was like a song sung to a gipsy tambourine and that her face stayed behind his eyelids all night long.

Mad folly, of course, even to have listened! But she had listened, and her heart, lonely and self-contained and timorous for all the briery barriers she had let grow around it, had waited hungrily for more.

But obviously there was no more. He did not care. He was going to work in the mill. He had wanted a job and he had been ingratiating and smooth and engaging until he got it. She let bitter acid, brewed from galling disappointment, seethe through her blood and sting the tip of her tongue.

"So, you're going to work in the mill. You never waste time, do you? I hope mother is able to make money enough to pay you. She has had a hard time, paying the men she has already."

"It was her suggestion." He stiffened himself, missing everything that a man should have seen and heard in her eyes, in her voice—a man who was in love. Then he plunged on angrily, because he was hurt and tingling from a vague scorn he thought he caught in her attitude. "It won't be necessary for you to see me, if it's painful to you. You can ride by and disdain me from beyond the wall. I've been looked at with loathing before. I can bear it."

He walked out, and Marian stood still, pressed against the old desk, her teeth set on her lip. The little room was small and gloomy from an overhanging hemlock tree. An old chair, twisting squeakily, stood there and she sat in it, her knuckles pressed against her teeth, her nails cutting her palms.

So—he was an opportunist, and callously brazen about it! And she, daughter of David Morgan, had dreamed dreams! She writhed against the cold leather of the chair. Then, on an impulse, she ran to the hall, dragged on a hat and coat, picked up the telephone, and gave a number crisply.

"I'm ringing," announced Mildred, the operator, in suave tones that made Marian's teeth click. All the girls in the exchange knew that she was calling Bry Hutton. All the girls knew also that probably Bry wasn't up yet.

Mrs. Hutton answered, a hurrying nervous woman with a nervous voice. Marian could almost see her standing there with a duster in her hand and an ear cocked to one side to listen for fear the beans might be boiling over. She was a marvelous housekeeper and it was rumored in the town that Mrs. Hutton kept a dustmop in a hall closet, ready to erase the tracks of visitors almost before the door had closed upon them. Bry was shaving, she said.

Bry Hutton had only two types of conversation where women were concerned. An ironic, half-bitter drawl and an insinuating, caressing intimacy, that verged faintly on insult. He began in this second manner but Marian cut it short crisply.

"I didn't call up to be petted, Bry. This is business. I want to go to Sally Gallup's. That mountain road is muddy and mother will fuss if I drive it myself. You'll have to take me."

"Oh, look here, sweetness, it's raining and cold as

hell. Can't you call Sally on the phone? Can't you wait till to-morrow? It might freeze over by that time."

"I want to go to-day. If you don't want to take me, Bry, I'll call somebody else."

"Well, don't do that. If you absolutely have to go, I'll take you. But it's a nutty idea, if you ask me. There's no sense to it."

"Nobody asked you—and perhaps there isn't any sense to it. Bry, will you take me to Asheville instead?"

"Sure—stick around. I'll be there."

"No, I won't stick around. I'm going into town, now." She spoke hurriedly. A car was stopping outside. In a moment Branford Wills would be going down those stairs. "I'll meet you at the drug-store, Bry," she said as she hung up.

Rain beat through the open window of her little car as she tore down the mountain. The wheels lurched and skidded on muddy curves but she was reckless and heedless. She had to get away. Anger rode her like an imp of white flame—anger that hurt. The stiff fiber in her that she had from her father, that odd fierce honesty that could be both intolerant and tender, was tortured by the thought of weakness, of surrender. How could she have been so weak—so easy? She braced herself so hard on the steering-wheel that her knuckles ached.

She did not like Bry Hutton particularly. She did not care particularly for any man she had met, as yet.

They were all too obvious, too aware of the fact that Virgie Morgan was supposed to be a rich woman. They were too glib or too diffident, they got their conversation and their manners from pulp magazines, or moving pictures, they were *country*! College men did not stay in little towns. They went ranging, seeking wider opportunities, and those who came in from outside, like Stanley Daniels, came with an air of condescending superiority.

She went around with Bry, as Lossie had so shrewdly surmised, to get her own way and because Bry was stimulating. Being with him was a constant battle and dominating him was an achievement for any woman. Marian rather liked the struggle to keep Bry aloof, to maintain her delicate, arrogant remoteness. And she had to get away—to stop thinking about Bradford Wills's lean, sardonic face.

At the drug-store she parked her car and went inside. The one clerk swabbed off the top of the counter and said, "What for you, Marian?"

"I'm just waiting." She shook the rain from her coat. "Has mother been in?"

"Not this morning. She's been trying to find Perry Bennett. Lucy and Mildred were calling all over town. I guess they found him. I called a while ago and told Lucy I saw him going into Plute's shoe-shop. I asked her if she wanted me to yell at him but she said never mind."

Marian stood near the door, watching. She was sorry she had told Bry to come here. Every one in

town would know in no time that she had gone off somewhere with him. But that might be just as well. If every one knew it, Ada Clark would know it, and the sharp-nosed girl who was head nurse, superintendent, and manager of the absurd little hospital would know it. Ultimately, by the sheer saturating effect of knowledge in small places, Branford Wills would also know it.

She waited until Bry was actually in the store, and then said with elaborate casualness, "If you're going over to the court-house, Bry, do you mind if I ride along with you? I have to see a dentist and mother worries when I drive on wet roads."

Bry stared stupidly, began, "I thought you—"

"I did," Marion cut in, with some scorn, "I meant to go alone but if you're going anyway I could save my gasoline, couldn't I?"

"Sure, come along." Bry comprehended finally and instantly appreciated the element of the clandestine. "Going to leave your car sitting there?"

"It's dirty anyway. It doesn't matter."

She lifted the latch and Bry said, "Wait a minute till I get some cigarettes. Cash a check for me, will you, Ed?"

"If it's any good, I will," the clerk snickered.

"It ought to be good. It's on the old man and I signed it myself."

"He'll come in here and raise the devil about it."

"He has to raise it somewhere. What do you run a drug-store for, anyway?"

The clerk rang the register and counted out some bills.

"If your mother wants to see Perry Bennett about that piece of spruce of his, Marian," he said, "you tell her it ain't any use. Perry's sold it—they drew the papers Saturday. He sold it to Wallace Withers."

"What would Wallace Withers want with that spruce?"

"Don't ask me. Maybe he's going to sell Christmas trees. Whatever he wants—there's money in it. That old guy is so stingy he honed a nickel razor-blade and used it over and over for ten years."

Marian followed Bry out to his car. She was quiet and thoughtful as Bry tore through town and around the mountain curves. She knew a great deal about her mother's affairs. She was certain that Virgie had counted on buying Perry Bennett's spruce. Wallace Withers was a lonely old man—Marian had never thought of him very much although now and then he dropped in to see her mother. She had disregarded him with the bland dismissal of youth for any one over forty. He was just some one who didn't matter. Probably he would put a sawmill in and strip off the timber, leaving another gashed, scarred slope for Mr. Bradford Wills to be ironic about.

"What are we supposed to do when we get to Asheville?" Bry broke in on her silence. "We aren't eloping, by any chance?"

"In a rain-coat?" Marian gave him a pitying look.

"When I elope it will be by moonlight, and the man will be lean and handsome. He won't look like you."

"What does it matter how he looks in the moonlight?"

"It doesn't matter. But it matters a lot when I look at him next day and discover what I've eloped with. And I wouldn't be thrilled at looking at you across a breakfast table, Bry, for years and years."

"I never get up for breakfast."

"The man I elope with has to get up. He'll bring me my toast and coffee, with a rosebud on the tray."

"You can't marry that fellow. He's married already. No weak-minded, angelic sap like that could possibly have escaped until now."

"It isn't weak to be gallant." Marian was abstracted because she had been trying to picture Bry across a breakfast table. His dampish hair and eyes full of things he had seen—things you didn't like to think about.

"Gallant and goofy," Bry finished for her. "Your forefathers hitched their women to the plow along with the ox. If they didn't pull a straight furrow they got the whip around their legs. I'll bet your great-grandfather sat by the fire in Scotland and smoked while his wife did the milking and brought in the wood."

"They didn't burn wood in Scotland. They burned peat."

"Well, whatever it was she had to carry it in. You're soft—all you women!"

"You," Marian stated, dryly, "aren't so hard yourself. If this car stalled in the mud right now, I've got more muscle to push it out than you have."

"I don't need muscle." He was complacent. "I've got brains. I know enough to give you good advice while you were pushing the car out."

"You make me sick with your conceit. I don't know why I came with you anyway. Turn around—I want to go back."

"Okay." He turned the car into a drive, without protest, backed it, turned it, not looking at her.

He was, Marian decided, impossible. She stopped thinking about him and watched the seeping little streams oozing from the gashed banks beside the road. Rocks were wet, glistening, with little flakes of ice still lingering in the northward crevices. The hemlocks and the little cedars huddled like prim ladies, cold and unhappy, holding their green skirts up around their ankles.

Marian regarded them, wondered why Wallace Withers had bought the spruce timber her mother wanted. If he knew that the Morgan mill needed it he would sell it, of course.

People had always seen to it that the Morgans had what they wanted.

Most people.

XI

VIRGIE had spiked her old hat on the hook and given a flick across her desk with a feather duster, when Branford Wills walked into the office that afternoon.

"I made it." He grinned feebly. "I won't be an important asset to the pulp business for a day or two—not till my knees stop knocking together, anyway. But here I am."

Virgie grinned back. She liked this lean, clear-eyed young man with the trace of iron in the set of his mouth and chin. And she needed him. Days had passed and still Tom Pruitt had not come back. Virgie had tramped through the cold wind and mud, up the long hill to Tom's little house. A rusty padlock had guarded the door. The window shutters were closed, no smoke came from the chimney, the porch echoed hollowly. Obviously the place was empty. Tom was gone—where, no one knew.

"The contrary old mule!" Virgie had stormed. "What's he pouting and hiding for anyway? Afraid he'll have to go to court, I suppose. Well," she said aloud to Wills, "it looks like I'm going to need some young bones in this business. My old ones are about worn out. Come along out with me and I'll tell the

boys you're here. You better hang around and watch the process for a few days, ask questions, and get underfoot. You can't work in a pulp mill unless you know what it's all about. Oh, yes—this is Lucy Fields, Mr. Wills. I run the mill and Lucy runs me."

Lucy looked up and said, "How do you do?" swallowing nervously. She was wondering what Stanley Daniels' attitude was going to be toward this new-comer. Virgie had instructed her to tell the men in the mill that Wills was coming, but she had not had the courage. For so long the mill had been an entity, a growth from the community, with a curious solidarity which had extended itself reluctantly to take in Stanley Daniels. Frank Emmet and old Hobe and the others were not going to be gracious about accepting a stranger, an "outlander" with what the mountain man called "town notions" and "book notions." Daniels' work was separate, distinct from the other operators of the mill, and he would not tolerate any interference with it. But a warm flush crept up Lucy's throat as Branford Wills bowed an acknowledgment of the introduction.

"I shall probably have to ask Miss Fields to boss me for a while," he said. "I'll be a sad tenderfoot, I'm afraid."

"I'll boss you," Virgie stated firmly, "and this plant can't afford tenderfeet. You have to cut your eye-teeth quick and cut them hard. Begin by stepping high over that steam hose if you don't want Jerry Shelton in your hair."

There was, to Virgie's eyes, only the customary reticence of the mountain man in the attitude of the old hands in the mill toward Branford Wills. They greeted him with the taciturn "Howdy" of the hills, looked him up and down, went on with their work.

"You show Wills how the drum-barkers work, Mank," Virgie ordered. "Start him in with the logs at this end and he'll come out with the pulp into the stuff chests, at the other."

But if she was satisfied with the calm of events at the mill, she was displeased when she went home at night, very weary.

The rain had stopped. The ground was freezing again and the wind was friendless and dreary. Lossie had not lighted the fire and the room that Virgie persisted in calling the "sitting-room" was cold.

"Wasn't nobody but me here all day," Lossie defended. "It looked like a waste to burn up the wood. If you'd put in a furnace now, Mis' Morgan—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Virgie, climbing the stairs heavily. She wanted her felt slippers. She wanted a loose robe and to get rid of her corset. She wanted coffee and an easy chair—and peace.

The upper floor still smelled of camphor and alcohol and Ada Clark's starched, scorched uniforms. But it was very still. Lossie had cleaned up the sick-room and put a clean counterpane on the bed, very flat and white. It looked lonely.

Marian's room was empty, too, and Virgie felt irritated at that. You spent your best years raising



young ones, you gave them the best of everything and all the freedom in the world. You were a good parent and what did you get? A cold house, empty and forlorn, nobody to talk to, nobody to give a darn if you dropped over from weariness or got pleurisy from dressing in a cold room.

Even in her own mind Virgie was only half aware of the real cause of her irritation, the pressing apprehension half ignored, which was her anxiety about Tom Pruitt.

She sat and stared gloomily into the fire, wondering what had happened to the old man and what he meant by wandering off, anyway, without a word to any one—the old mule-head! Sat, all unaware of the drama that had been enacted that day, on the cold slope of the ridge above Hazel Fork, a drama with only one witness. That witness was young Bill Gallup.

Bill Gallup had been driving the maintenance truck along a rutty mountain road.

The road followed the slash ribbon over the slope of a ridge where the steel towers and wires of a main transmission line linked up the eager plunge of mountain torrents with the deeper surge of the commerce of the world.

Beautiful as a platinum girdle, catching what light lived in the sullen winter sky, the power line ran, direct and keen and purposeful as the keen and purposeful thought of the engineers who had planned it. Bill Gallup's soul, tuned to the measured and perfect rhythm of pure mathematics, thrilled at the

looping beauty of it, a thrill he would never lose and which never diminished.

He had hoped to build lines like this, in the high plateaus of Tibet, perhaps, or across tropic jungles. He had had dreams of bridging tidal rivers, of thrusting arrogant dams across the breasts of valleys. And here he was, driving a ratty old truck that boiled over on every rise and staggered through muddy flats, plowing up a ridge to see if a tower-support had been undermined by winter rain.

But it was a job. And in these days a job was a job. Bill meditated on the thankfulness he ought to be feeling, as he steered the truck between two stumps. Then through the low growing brush of the slash he saw a tall figure approaching—a man who carried a gun.

He slowed the truck and waited. Mountain men were sensitive for all their harsh exteriors and to pass on without stopping to pass the time of day might give offense that could bring down on a power concern the vindictive and sadistic enmity of a whole family connection.

Fires had broken out on watersheds and trees fallen on power lines for no other reason than the social shortcomings of the gentlemen in charge.

Bill called, "Howdy, neighbor," and trod the brake. The engine instantly sighed, gurgled, steamed, and died. The man with the gun came nearer and Bill saw that it was old Tom Pruitt.

"Hello, Tom," he greeted. "What are you fixing

to hunt up here, this time of year? That looks like a bear gun to me."

"Yeah," he said, "this here's a bear gun. I been toting it round over the ridge yonder. Thought I mought maybe could see me a varmint. I was just shackling down to get me a bite to eat. You goin' back to that there lighthouse of your'n? I'll ride along and see if Jim Bishop's wife has got a cold pone in the stove."

"Sure, get in. You must have been out quite a while—you're pretty muddy and tired out, from the look of you."

"Slept out." Tom was laconic.

"Pretty cold for sleeping out. You'd better get along home and take you a good stiff drink and go to bed," Bill advised. "You sound hoarse as a crow. You're likely to get pneumonia, weather like this."

"No, I won't catch nothing. I'm plenty tough. I ain't through huntin' yet. Got to git back over that ridge again."

Bill agreed by silence, finished his inspection, turned back down the hill. At the Bishop house Tom got out and went around to the back door. Jim Bishop's wife was a girl from the village and Bill remembered that he had heard she was distantly related to Tom. Any kinship, to the most remote degree, was important in the mountains. Bill drove back to the plant, confident that Tom would be taken care of.

An hour later, as he went back to work after

lunch, he saw Tom Pruitt again. Gun slung over his shoulder, Tom was slogging down the muddy road. His shoulders were slumped and his legs moved heavily as though he were very weary. He was an old man, Bill remembered. He had had a haggard look and his eyes had been a little wild. But these old mountain geezers were tough as hickory knots. Bill put Tom out of his mind. He had enough to worry about.

Tom turned off the road presently and struck directly across the ridge, following a dim trail through the crowding laurel. The path was steep and tangled, having been made by game. It crept beneath tall, knotty thickets of rhododendron, and skirted open places, keeping to the shelter of the undergrowth. It had been trodden out by creatures wishing to hide, and it suited Tom, for he had no desire to be seen.

Twice he rested, crouched on rocks, stretching his legs, his ears buzzing as his heart strained in the thin air. On the upward climb he did not bother to look about him, but toiled on, stooping, the gun heavy under his arm, his head down, his eyes on the damp deer prints and frost-rimed ruts of the trail.

But once on the crest his manner changed, turned feral, cautious, his eyes glinting. He stalked silently, his old hat jerked down, the pocket of his overall jacket sagging from a double weight of cartridges.

The opposite slope of the ridge was very different from the brushy way he had just climbed. Ahead, as far as his eye could carry, was a great, untouched,

majestic expanse of hardwood forest. Trees, vast and quiet, leafless and magnificent, in their aloof columnar austerity, covered the slow descent and a rolling expanse below.

Tom breathed heavily, air whistling through his teeth as he looked at them. His eyes, for a moment, were worshipful. He moved forward, stumbling a little, and laid his palm on the bark of a huge poplar, letting his eyes travel up into the high reaches of the naked boughs. Then the look grew crafty and he shrank close to the tree, making himself narrow, keeping his head back so that though he could see far through the timber, he himself could not be seen.

Taking a downward roundabout way, he advanced from tree to tree, carefully finding the moss underfoot, making no sound. A bunch of wild gooseberry bushes offered ambush and he dropped into them, parting the twigs soundlessly, lying still for a long interval, his gaze fixed on the slope below.

There was an indentation in the half-frozen ground and into this his elbow fitted easily, because in that place for two days it had rested. There were corn-bread crumbs under one bush and the empty paper bag, in which Tom had carried his provender on his first day in the woods, was crushed into flatness and carefully weighted down with a wet stone.

The ground was cold and Tom's body ached after a half-hour in the cramped place, but he shifted his limbs, flexed his hands, and shrugged his collar up

about his neck, always keeping his eyes on a spot far below between the tall poplars.

Down there a woods track ran, a narrow road made years since by the land-drunk, boom-mad crew who had invaded the country to violate its ancient peace with ballyhoo and colored flags on sticks, and to leave it confused and shyster-ridden, sold into slavery but with no master, prey to the vicissitudes of courts and weather, woods fires and men of no conscience, and with no defense. Tom had scouted and watched and listened well, around the town. Protected by a vague indefiniteness, that merged him into the mountain scene, made him only one more old man in faded clothing, with broken shoes and a growth of beard, he had learned what he wished to know.

His native shrewdness had its roots in an implacable fierce possessiveness—the same grim independence that had moved his grandfathers to forsake the tamer valleys of tidewater and the piedmont plain for this remorseless land where his own was menaced, his pride outraged by strangers—he could endure as the hunting panther endures.

His muscles, his worn bones, his gaunt belly made no outcry. A hate as ruthless as any force of nature warmed, filled, and eased him, made his cold fingers steady and his eye keen. He watched the road.

The light grew cold and thin, the trees stirred and worried as trees do when night begins to climb the

mountains. A dry twig fell, a crossbill swung across a lighter space, stopped for an instant on the bark of a cedar, turned head down, and began its angry cry. All the frost-powdered drift of leaves stirred briefly, in a raw breath of wind, then was as swiftly still.

Old Tom tensed a little. For forty years he had been a woodsman. He knew all the signs. Something was abroad in this quiet winter forest. He had waited two days and a night and now his waiting was at an end.

He pulled himself up slightly, dropped his hat and rested his left arm upon it. The gun came up and was steady. The cool palm-worn stock and breech were smooth under the old man's hand. Its weight gave him the feeling of power and dominance that belongs only to kings. For a long interval he made no move.

Then in a flash the crossbill hurled itself to the top of the tree, screaming. Bark sifted down. And far down the slope Tom Pruitt saw what he had been watching for for forty long hours.

A car had stopped on the woods road. Two men got out and walked up the rutty track and presently a third man followed. Tom was troubled at that. He had not counted on a third man. But he lay motionless, watching.

The three began climbing the slope, stopping at intervals to study the trees. One was obviously the conductor of the expedition, making gestures, calling the attention of the others to the lifting majesty of the trunks, the spread of branches. Tom Pruitt fol-

lowed this man with a narrowed eye, precise and remorseless, over the sight of the resting rifle.

They came closer. The leader moved ahead, turning back at intervals to direct the gaze of the others upon the lay of the land, the absence of underbrush, the ease with which this virgin stand could be timbered. As though he heard every word Tom Pruitt knew what this man was saying, though their voices reached him only as low murmurs through the forest stillness.

High in the tree the crossbill was agitated. Men born to the woods, Tom thought with scorn, would have known enough to look around, known that something watched below the crossbill's tree. But these men did not belong in places of watchful silences. They were outlanders. They had come to rob. And because they had no craft they were helpless.

Very slowly Tom's long forearm flexed, very slowly the muscles of his lean hand—his right hand—tightened!

XII

THE drama came home to Virgie Morgan at ten o'clock, when her ears had begun to ache from listening for Marian's return, and wild angers at the stark thoughtlessness of young people to possess her.

She heard a car stop, and sprang to her feet, grim-faced and reproachful.

"Well—did they close up all the other places?" She began sharply. But she stopped at the sight of Marian's white face. Marian's eyes were big and frightened.

"Mother—" she began—"Bry and I went to Sally Gallup's this afternoon when it stopped raining. On the way back we picked up Tom Pruitt. He's been up there—in the woods—for days. He's out in the car now—he's all muddy. Mother—Tom killed a man—over on Hazel Fork."

The sound Virgie Morgan made at Marian's announcement was half a groan and half a convulsive, absurd squeak. There was horror in it, but under that a terrible tragic resignation.

Somehow, for days, for weeks even, she had felt the pressure of this coming thing. The unrest and unhappy nerve twitchings of impending change. She

had decided in the morning, in spite of the apparent calm at the mill, that now her forebodings had come true—that something was beginning in the ruthless, inexplicable fashion with which life suddenly shifts to the sinister.

But even her stout spirit was not braced against such a fierce acceleration of tempo.

She stumbled up, gray-faced. "Where is he?" she demanded. "How do you know he killed a man? Killed who?"

Marian was steady, though her eyes were big and terrified.

"He doesn't know who it was, Mother. He shot somebody. They were trying to steal his timber over on Hazel Creek. Now he wants us to take him over to jail. Bry and I don't know what to do. Bry thinks Tom is crazy."

Lossie was standing, staring blankly at the door.

"Get my coat," Virgie ordered. "I'll talk to Tom. We're not in a big enough mess—he would have to do a thing like this!"

Marian protested. "It's no use to talk to him, Mother. He's so excited when he tries to talk it doesn't make sense and his teeth chatter. Bry doesn't want to drive way over to the county-seat to-night. Couldn't we telephone the sheriff?"

"We won't telephone anybody. I'll handle this. Bring Tom in here. He didn't kill anybody. Tell Bry to bring him in."

"I don't believe he'll come in. He didn't want us

to stop at all. He said if we wouldn't take him to jail that he'd get out and walk."

"Give me that coat, Lossie. I'll fetch the old fool in here myself." Virgie fumbled into the sleeves. She was a strong woman but now she felt numb all over and her knees were fluid and cold. She walked out into the winter dark, holding her jaw grimly to keep her teeth from clacking. "What's all this, Tom Pruitt?" she demanded, as she came up to the silent car, standing there in the dark with headlights burning dimly. "What's all this foolishness?"

Tom seemed to heave himself up with an effort. His long, gaunt body straightened, in the shadows. His breath hissed over his teeth.

"They was in my timber, Mis' Morgan. I was watchin' for 'em. I got one. I'd ought to got them all. I would 'a got all of 'em but my old gun jammed. It hadn't ought to jammed, neither—I had it cleaned out good. Them cartridges Bryson sold me wasn't no good."

"Get down out of there and come into this house. What business have you got—scaring these children to death? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"No, I ain't comin' in. I got mud on my feet. I got to go to jail, Mis' Morgan. I shot him—but he hadn't no business in there measurin' up my timber."

"Nobody's going to take you to any jail this cold night. You clean your feet and come along in here! I've had about all the foolishness I can stand for one day. If they want you they'll come after you fast

enough. Shove him out of there, Bry. I'm getting out of patience—I might muss him up if I let my Irish go."

After some argument and a minor scuffle, Tom was half dragged, half carried into the house. Lossie was white-faced, Marian frankly crying. Virgie shut the door firmly.

"Much obliged, Bry. You can go on home now. I'll handle this alone from here on."

"Do you want me to telephone or send anybody, Mrs. Morgan?"

"No, I'll do the telephoning. Just go on home—and don't talk, Bry—not to-night, not to anybody. Tom's all wrought up—there may be something to this business and there may not. Don't talk till we know and then there won't be anything to take back. He needs some hot food and a shave and a night's sleep. He'd die of pneumonia if they stuck him in that cold jail in the shape he's in."

"If—he did do it, they'll be looking for him, Mrs. Morgan," Bry said. "He ate lunch at Jim Bishop's house—he told them he was hunting bear. Jim will be bound to talk."

"Well, he isn't hiding anywhere. They can find him easy enough. But I've got to take care of him—he hasn't got sense enough to take care of himself. Marian, stop whimpering and get some of your father's old clothes—and you make some hot coffee, Lossie—make a lot of coffee."

Giving orders, being executive and the matriarch

again, helped Virgie keep her calm. But when Bry had gone and Marian had slipped upstairs, and Tom Pruitt, fed and warmed and dressed in some of David's old clothes lay sleeping on the couch by the fire, Virgie dropped into a straight chair and sat gripping the arms, letting her spirit tremble and her stout heart shudder with apprehension.

She looked up at David's portrait. David would have known what to do in a situation like this—but David's eyes had caution and judgment in them. David had never done anything on impulse. She could not seek for precedents. Nothing like this had ever happened to David.

David had been a slight man and Tom's lean ankles thrust out pathetically from a pair of David's old trousers. David's socks would not cover Tom's feet—the heels made little pouches under his instep, the toes were stretched tight. They had made Tom dress, fed him, compelled him to rest, as they would have managed a man in a coma. If he heard their voices he made no sign. He had gulped a few swallows of food, then ignoring cup and spoon had sunk into slumber, relaxed and pitiful. He was, Virgie saw, an old man. A very old man. Too old to be tormented.

David, likely, would have been able to prevent this affair. Virgie knew that she had heckled Tom too much, that she was vaguely to blame. Her motives had been good, but so were the motives of all fatuous blunderers. If Tom spoke the truth, this was

real trouble. It was murder. And murder, in any country, under any circumstances, was an ugly business.

It loosed the law, a whirling machine that men had contrived to grind the grist of their passions and bring out of them safety and justice—but a ruthless mechanism of ancient codes and remorseless procedure that could not be stopped after it was set in motion until the pitiful grist was ground fine.

If Tom had killed a man there was no earthly way to save him. Virgie felt herself sickening. She knew how useless any of the timeworn devices would be in Tom's case. He had, so he said, shot from ambush and deliberately. He had said so, and no one would be able to alter his story. She knew Tom. He was not mad. He would be only too grimly sane. He would face the law with the stony silence of the mountain man, which had beneath it a sort of terrible, distorted pride and a fierce sort of anger that was not heat, but cold. No one could save him.

She looked at his limp hand, hanging to the floor, the knuckles hard, the thumb bent and horny, stained with bark and the blue metal of the old rifle, the hand that had rubbed David Morgan's back and turned his helpless body in the bed—and suddenly she turned sick. Going to the front door she flung it open and stood there, drawing long gasping breaths. The black cold of the night, the high hollow sky, the dogs coming questioningly to sniff, steadied her. She was Virgie Morgan who had taken a tough job and

beaten it; she was Virgie Morgan whom men obeyed and listened to.

Over her head, unseen, unheard, a dark arc between her and the stars, wings might threaten. The wings of menace. For days she had felt their vague threat. Something was working against her. She had to fight. The timid thing that crouched and waited felt the swoop of descent, the clipping steel of ruthless talons.

She closed the door swiftly and silently. She closed other doors, too. Marian would not be asleep. Marian would be lying stiff in her bed, listening. Lossie might be listening, too, though probably Lossie was sleeping. Lossie had little imagination. To make certain Virgie climbed the stairs, quietly but without concealment. Through an open door Marian's voice said softly, "Mother?"

Virgie stepped into the dark room, breathed the flower scent of Marian's powder, her silken things in sachets, her pretty dresses. The flower scent of Marian herself, a dark shadow of soft hair on the whiteness of the bed.

"You go to sleep," she ordered in a whisper. "Everything is quiet. Tom's asleep—he isn't young any more. He's almost twenty years older than I am. I'm going to get a blanket and take a nap in the big chair."

"Why don't you go to bed, Mother?" Marian pleaded. "Mother—I'm afraid! He was—so awful

—he sat up so straight—it was like doom. He's always been one of the family, Mother—”

“You lie down and hush, Baby.” Virgie was tender. “You’ll be sick yourself. I’m going to shut this door so you can’t see the light.” She bent over Marian and laid her cheek, firm and cold, against her child’s petal skin, and Marian’s arms, slim and virginal, clutched her tight. “Go to sleep now”—Virgie was hoarsely brusque—“I’ll attend to this business. They won’t hang Tom—don’t worry.”

“Mother”—concentrated horror trembled in Marian’s throat—“Mother—it’s *gas*! Lethal gas! Like a mad dog!”

“Will you be quiet?” Virgie jerked the covers straight, patted Marian’s forehead. “Be a good girl now and mind your mother. I’ve always worked things out, haven’t I? Well?”

She went out, shutting the door carefully. She closed the door of Lossie’s room, too. Then from her own room she got swiftly a leather coat with a sheepskin collar and the old hat she wore into the woods. She put a flash-light into the pocket of the coat and from her purse on the bureau she took all the money that she had, folded it, stuffed it into the top of her corset. Then she let the lid of the blanket chest down softly but audibly, and went down the stairs, switching off the light in the hall below.

Tom was still sleeping, collapsed and defenseless in his exhaustion. He would need a warm coat. His

hat lay on the floor, shapeless, stained with pitch and sawdust. She picked it up and straightened the brim. With the flash-light she explored a hall closet, found an old corduroy woods coat of David's. It would be too small but it would have to serve. She let the clock mark another hour before she stirred from her chair, then, buttoning the sheepskin under her chin, she went out the back door.

The dogs came rushing but she quieted them with a word. The garage door creaked slightly but she got it open, and she knew how to push her car out and roll it down the sloping drive without a sound. She had done it many times when David lay ill.

Tom woke with difficulty, stupefied with sleep and weariness. She gave him coffee and whisky, she made him put on David's coat and his hat. Seen from the rear he looked a taller, broader David Morgan and Virgie's heart gave a sudden, clutching pang.

"Where we going?" Tom demanded.

"Hush up!" Virgie ordered in a whisper. "Come along."

The car rolled silently down the steep drive, between black hedges of laurel. At the road Virgie started the engine, turned on the lights. Her plans were vague in her mind. To get Tom away—delay—perhaps the man he had shot at was not dead. Perhaps he had not been hit at all. Tom was old. Delay—till something was certain. Alibis would be no use. Tom would defeat any attempt at alibi. There was

Bry Hutton. There was Jim Bishop. No hope but to get Tom away. Delay. This was crime. Compounding a felony. She would be involved. No matter.

Tom had stood by her. All his life he had had no thought but the mill, no thought of himself. He had no family—no one but her. She had to save him somehow.

All the dark, winding mountain roads she knew well. Every huddled little farm, every dark, shuttered country store at a cross-road with its goggle-eyed gasoline pump. Every man in three counties knew her, knew her old car, knew Tom Pruitt. She raced the dawn westward, keeping to the dirt roads, with Tom slumped on the seat beside her. Now and then he dozed, jerking away dully. She had put plenty of whisky in his coffee. He was warmed, relaxed, he asked no questions.

Once he said, "Looks like you're takin' a mighty long way round, Mis' Morgan."

Virgie said, with a desperate sternness, "You're not going to jail, Tom Pruitt. You never killed anybody."

"Yes'm—I hit him. He dropped clean. I'd have hit the other one but my gun jammed."

"Shut up!" snapped Virgie. "I'm going to take you over the Tennessee line and put you on a train to Cincinnati."

Tom gulped. "No'm—no'm, I can't go. I can't

go to no big town. I'd git lost. I got to go to jail. You lemme out of here, Mis' Morgan, and I'll walk back. I got to go to jail."

But Virgie only drove faster. The road was crooked and slippery. She had to slow down. She would have to buy gasoline at daylight but she wanted to get across the state line first. Once over she could breathe again. She was, she knew, doing a mad reckless thing. Defying the law, aiding a man to escape—a woman of position with a business reputation to uphold—but there was nothing else to do.

She turned west again, avoiding the traveled road that led up to the power-plant. The road she took was wild and wandering. Boulders scraped the running gear, branches snatched at the fenders. Tom sat tensely, talking to himself, mumbling.

"You lemme out of here, Mis' Morgan. You lemme get out and walk."

Virgie's face was grim. Her eyes fixed themselves on the wan beam of the headlights. A few more miles and she would feel safe.

She saw the other car overtaking her before Tom did. Lights appeared in the mirror over the windshield, made the gangled growth on either side leap out of the shadow. She knew, somehow, what it was.

A horn blasted. Virgie put on speed, but the slewing of her wheels told her that it was no use. She had failed. She chose a wide spot, pulled aside, slowed, her heart pounding, hoping against hope that this might be some mountain boys returning from drink-

ing in town, knowing somehow that it was not. Tom did not move. The car came alongside, crowded her so that she could not go on, stopped. A man got out.

Virgie said, "Hello, Lon," wearily.

Lon Hicks, the deputy sheriff, said, "Howdy, Mis' Morgan. I been following you. You got Tom Pruitt, ain't you? We got to take him back with us."

Virgie employed none of the glib falsehoods she had been making up in her mind as she tore along. They would have been useless anyway. She could not lie. She was a mountain woman, without guile.

She said quietly, "All right, Lon. I was hoping I'd get him over the line so you wouldn't get him quite so quick. I guess you better take me along too. I'm to blame for this—not Tom. He didn't want to come."

Lon Hicks's lean face was inscrutable in the dim light, but his drawling voice was quiet.

"I reckon I won't take you, Mis' Morgan. I reckon I'd have run Tom over the line myself if so be it wasn't against the law. You go on home. I ain't seen you real good, anyway."

At dawn Virgie drove her old car into the garage. The house was dark and still. She made herself a cup of coffee, drank it hot, went upstairs, and took off her damp shoes and her dress. She would get a couple of hours' sleep.

Then she would go to Asheville—perhaps to Roanoke or to Richmond. She would get the best lawyer

in the country to defend Tom. It was all she could do now.

A heaviness of defeat was upon her. Dark wings shadowed the sun.

XIII

IN a long trough, fed by slow streams of water, a mass of macerated wood moved steadily toward the great caldrons that would steam and froth and dissolve it, with sharp bisulphides, turn every raw, green chip to a limp and obedient mass of fiber while the noxious breath of the process steamed out on the mountain air.

Branford Wills, his first day in the mill less than two hours old, stood beside the trough and tended the moving mass with a wooden tool hand-made and polished to a rich patina by the hands of a generation of pulp-makers. He was learning the "process" as Virgie had instructed him, and if the men who initiated him were stiff and curt and taciturn about answering questions, Wills put it down to the inborn aloofness of the mountaineer, the same intolerant independence that he had encountered on the government work in the National Park.

He met their glumness with a quiet dignity of his own, knowing how foolish and mistaken any attitude of wise-cracking familiarity would be.

When old Jerry, lean-faced and sour-eyed, said roughly, "If you're a-figuring on working here you better git yourself some working gloves. Men don't

fool with this stuff with bare hands," Wills countered by inquiring where gloves could be bought. Slightly mollified, Jerry expressed himself concerning the value of two-bit and four-bit gloves, then as though afraid that he had unbent too much growled, "Git a hold this-a-way! You're the awkwardest feller I ever see!"

Wills had expected dislike and resentment, the usual hostility of a clannish group to a stranger, and he was relieved to encounter no active antagonism. Only the chemist, young Daniels, had been definitely unfriendly. Daniels had shaken hands, but with a withdrawn and slightly contemptuous look in his eye, and had gone back to his laboratory without a backward look.

The dampness, the steam, and the nauseous odors were pretty bad and Wills was not entirely strong yet. But a dogged determination made him swallow grimly, and stand braced, with his feet apart, listening to Jerry's impatient instruction. These muscular, grim, silent men might despise him for an outlander now, but they should not pity him for being a weakling and a quitter.

"Keep that there moving," ordered Jerry, yelling above the howling crunch of the drum-barkers. Then he muttered, "Time and nation!" and scrubbed his nose with his glove.

Across the damp, odorous, roaring mill, a red-clad figure was hurrying—Marian Morgan. Jerry pushed back his cap, in a half-grudging gesture of

respect. The mountain woman has been a chattel and an inferior for generations. The mountain man has learned to admire and respect the female sex but slowly.

Wills mouthed, "Good morning," but the words were lost in the grinding bedlam.

Marian's face was pale, her lips straight. She said, "I want to talk to you," but it was the gesture of her hand that made the words intelligible.

Wills handed the wooden paddle to Jerry, who received it with a flourish of obvious relief, and followed Marian past the battery of steaming digesters, through a sheet-iron door into the yard. A cold wind was blowing but after the noise of the mill Marian's voice sounded loud and flat.

"Please come over here to the car. I want to talk to you and I don't want Lucy to hear."

He followed her into the car. She shut the door, drove out the gate, and into a little weedy lane that ran through a lumber yard. There she stopped the car and said without preamble, "I'm sorry to impose on you. I know you're busy—with a new job and all—but there's no one else I can turn to. It's about Tom Pruitt. You didn't know Tom—but he helped my father build this mill. He has been like one of our family always. A week ago he disappeared—and that's why mother got the idea of putting you in the mill. She needed a man. Last night I found Tom. He was over on Hazel Fork. He owns some timber over there—rich timber. A man named Cragg

from Baltimore was trying to steal it. And Tom shot him."

Wills sat silent for a moment. Then he said, "Do they know—the men back there?"

"I suppose so. They took Tom to jail last night. Mother went to Asheville early this morning to get a lawyer and arrange about a bond for Tom."

"Then—this Cragg isn't dead?"

"Not yet. Tom shot too low. The bullet went into his shoulder and hit the spine."

"I see." Things were coming clear. The attitude of the men in the mill. Their eyes, judging him gloomily. Tom Pruitt, who belonged to the mill, had always belonged, was in trouble, and he, Branford Wills, a young upstart had blandly walked into Tom's job.

"The reason I came to talk to you is this," Marian went on. "Even if you don't admire me an awful lot—"

"But—great Scott!" Wills began, and then as abruptly ceased. He could not say, "I'm mad about you." He could not speak out the things that seethed in his heart and stormed at his guarding lips to be spoken. She was Marian Morgan, of the Morgan mill. And he was a mill-worker, empty-handed and undistinguished by any prowess of skill or accomplishment.

"But I know," Marian went on, not looking at him, "that you are fond of mother. And this morn-

ing, after she left, Lon Hicks, the deputy at the jail, telephoned. He says Tom is going to refuse bail. That he wants to stay in jail. He's old and queer—and he was over on that ridge for days with no shelter and very little to eat, watching for those men, lying in a bush to waylay them. He's upset—and somebody will have to talk sense to him. He has to come back—mother needs him. So I'm going over to talk to him—and you have to go along."

"I'll be glad to help, of course—to do anything I can. But I'm not quite sure what it is that you want me to do—or why—"

"You've taken Tom's job. It's all over town, of course—things get around in a flash. Tom will have heard it by now. But—if you talk to him—tell him he hasn't been pushed out—"

"I see. Shall we go now? Could I wash my hands and get a coat?"

She drove back to the mill yard and waited, aware of Lucy Fields behind the window of the little office, watching—and on fire with curiosity probably, poor silly Lucy.

Wills came back and Marian drove away without a word. She sat, stiffly erect, behind the wheel, looking straight ahead, the stern line of her lips and the guarded chill of her eyes hiding the aching tumult that seethed in her heart.

She was hating herself for being so vulnerable, for the mad desire she had now to swing into a

lonely side road and let the engine die, while she cried helplessly and pitifully in this man's arms.

He was sitting straight. He hadn't cared, of course. That had been fever, the foolishness of illness, that had made him look at her adoringly and clutch at her fingers and say things about gipsy tambourines and her face burning behind his eyelids all night long.

But she, Marian Morgan, who all her life had been so fiercely individualistic, her mind as coolly practical as a well-made watch, always sure, always self-contained, was no longer sure. If this was being in love, it was white pain and torment and cruelty past belief. She stared at the damp road, scudding under, and at the leafless bushes slipping by, and fought for the grim pride she had from her father, and with it the sharp tonic of anger that made it easier to be frigid and not to look around at this man, sitting so near to her, who, even remote and unconsidering as he appeared, could made tingling flashes of awareness tremble along her arms and hands so that the steering-wheel quivered.

She fixed her mind on old Tom. Remembering things, remembering days when her father lay slowly dying, when the house was heavy with the tragic air of sorrow, when people walked on tiptoe somberly and telephones were muffled with wads of paper. She had been very young then, practically a child, but old enough to be frightened and to suffer keenly. She had been summoned home from school into an at-

mosphere of doom, and her one comfort had been old Tom.

Many times, when her mother was busy and harassed at the mill, and the incoherent mumblings of the paralyzed sick man made Marian's young flesh creep and her throat cramp horribly, old Tom had appeared in the drive, steering a rickety old truck.

"Got to go up toward Little Fork to fetch them boys in. You come along and go with me. Woods is too lonesome when you get as old as I be. Feller gets to talking to himself and next thing you know they'll be telling round town that old Tom Pruitt has gone crazy."

On those trips Tom had taught her all he knew. The ways of the woods creatures, how to tell poison-oak from the harmless five-leaved creeper, how to keep silent and observe while a snake shed its skin. He had told her stories of early days before the highways penetrated the mountains, when a trip to Waynesville was a day's journey, when wagons had to be taken apart and carried over the mountains, and what dim roads there were followed the beds of streams and were practical only for men on horse-back.

He had taught her a little of the odd reserve of the mountain people, the friendliness that met an advance half-way but never presumed, never was forward, that rested always on a stony base of elemental pride. The scalawag sons of mountain men who ran liquor, set fires, and poached deer on the

game reserves, he despised and disowned. "Country trash," he dismissed them. Braggarts and liars avoided him.

Gentle, mild, and kind—how could old Tom have done this incredible thing? What temporary madness had possessed him? Whatever the impulse, Tom had believed himself fundamentally justified. It was an old law. In the mountains a man defended his own. Now, he accepted the penalty with a dignified grace. She could not desert him.

Virgie would hire the best lawyer available, but a lawyer could do little with Tom and nothing at all for him till it was known whether the man, Cragg, would live or die.

At a little store on the edge of the county-seat, Marian stopped and bought a bag of little cakes, a package of raisins. Always on their trips in the old truck, Tom had carried raisins loose in the pocket of his denim coat. She had seen him many times, luring a mountain jay or a squirrel near-by, scattering raisins on the moss at the foot of a tree.

The deputy jailer was a man she did not know, but he let them in when he heard her name. The jailer's wife looked in her purse, ran her flat hands over Marian's body, automatically, looked in the paper bag.

"I don't reckon you fetched Pruitt any hack-saws"—the deputy showed broken teeth in a grin—"but them's the rules."

Tom was pitifully glad to see her and he shook

hands with Wills with a grave and pathetic dignity.

"Mother has gone to see about getting you out, Tom," Marian said. "You must come home. Mother needs you."

Tom considered this, looking straight ahead, sitting on a bench holding Marian's hand tightly. Then he shook his head.

"I reckon I'll stay here. I shot that feller. He was fixing to steal my timber. I'd a shot them all if my gun hadn't jammed. Never knowed it to do that-a-way before."

"But you must come, Tom. He didn't die. He won't die. And the mill will go to ruin without you. It's your mill, Tom—part yours. You can't let the mill down."

"She's hired you, aint she?" Tom looked levelly at Wills. "I figured she got put out at me when I stayed over there so long. I was waiting for them fellers to come back and it looked like they never was comin'. Then Lon told me Mis' Morgan had hired this feller, so I figure I'll just stay here a spell. Lon treats me all right."

They argued in vain. Wills strove to be convincing and caught a grateful look in Marian's eyes. But Tom was immovable. He tore the top from the box of raisins and poured some out into Marian's hand.

"Why did you do it, Tom?" Marian pleaded. "You could have scared them off. You didn't need to shoot."

"They was after my timber. I had a right to that

piece of poplar—your ma said so. I reckon I better stay on here a spell."

He did not, she saw, look ahead. He was old and growing childish. He was not thinking of what might lie ahead, remorselessly, for him. He had an idea that by remaining here, patiently, behind bars, he was somehow paying his debt to an overzealous system of jurisprudence, the payment demanded for a private act of reasonable reprisal.

He was resigned to legal interference with his personal liberties, but it was obvious that he had no idea of having done a capital crime. There was a grim patience in his attitude that went back to codes older than America, went back as the mountain people's odd speech and ancient ballads went back to an Anglo-Saxon tradition, an older, sterner civilization of harquebus, land entailed and inviolate, and freemen responsible only to a preoccupied king or a silent Heaven.

Marian choked on the thought of what lay ahead for Tom, and flung her arms around him suddenly.

"Oh, Tom, why did you do it? Everything is so wrong! We can't get along without you."

Tom gulped, reddened, scrubbed his hand over his unshaven chin.

"What you worrying about? Mis' Morgan'll git along. She's enough for a whole pack of 'em. Nobody ain't never got the best of her yet."

They left him soon after that, left him calmly

superintending the jailer's children, who were cracking walnuts in the corridor.

Wills, seeing the misting of tears on Marian's eyelids, said quietly, "Would you like me to drive?"

"No, I'll drive. I'm all right."

But he, Wills thought bitterly, as they flew along the curving mountain road, was not all right. Nothing was all right. He looked sidelong at Marian's delicate profile, at the sweet, strong curve of her lips, the dusting of golden freckles on her nose, the faint tinge of pink along her misted lashes, and ached fiercely to take her into his arms. He twisted his lips ironically, thinking of her scathing scorn if he tried it, missing entirely the desolation that dimmed every line of her face, and made her hands move dully.

Stiffly silent, eyes straight ahead, they drove back to the mill—two young, angry, frustrated creatures, yearning for each other, braced against each other, rigidly correct—and stone-blind!

XIV

IN the early afternoon Virgie returned to the mill, spent and dispirited and rasped raw with irritation. She had hired the best lawyer to be found, she had arranged for bail for Tom, only to have him sit back stubbornly, refuse to leave the jail or to co-operate with the lawyer.

"I done it. I shot him," he said over and over.

There was, apparently, nothing to be done at present.

"Leave him set a while," advised Lon Hicks. "He's kind of numb right now, layin' up there on that ridge in the cold. He'll come to himself before long and git to thinking—and then you can talk sense to him."

So there was nothing to do but abandon her futile efforts, and go back to the mill. And once there she let her weariness and exasperation have their way with her.

"You'd think," she snapped at Lucy Fields, "that those men out there loading that car were building the pyramids and had six thousand years to finish the job! When did we start running this plant in slow motion?"

"They're short-handed, Mrs. Morgan—and with Tom gone—" Lucy faltered explanations.

"Where's Wills? Did he come to-day?"

"He's working with Jerry on the feeders. He went away with Marian—but they came back before noon. It was so cold in the yard—and he isn't really well yet—"

"So he went off with Marian? I suppose she wanted something for that Little Theatre and if the whole mill happens to go to pot, why, that's no consequence!"

"I think they went to the jail. Hobe said—"

"Answer that, will you? And if anybody else wants to talk about that business on Hazel Fork, tell 'em I've been stricken stone-deaf! Tell Mildred when she gets all the town gossip off the wire she can put in a call to Baltimore for me. There's something funny about this Cragg business, something that doesn't add up."

"Yes, Mrs. Morgan. And when you have time Mr. Daniels would like to see you. He said it was important."

"I suppose he has another of his ideas. He's always finding something in a catalogue that saves a thousand dollars or so in production costs and only costs fifteen or twenty thousand to install!"

Virgie was very low in her mind as she opened the door of Stanley Daniels' laboratory.

"Well, what's on your mind?" she demanded.

Daniels looked up from his work, wiped his hands quickly.

"Oh, Mrs. Morgan—sorry I had to ask you to

come over, but there was a risk that this stuff would solidify if I left it—and I thought you should know about these tests. Something is going wrong with the solvents—I can't say just what till I finish running these. In the number three vat the fiber seems to be so weakened and destroyed that the whole run will be worthless. Would you like to look at this?" He wiped a tube swiftly, held it to the light, shook it.

Virgie crossed the room, studied the brown mixture. "What's wrong with it?" she asked.

"Watch." Daniels tilted the tube, let the solution spin out. Ignorant of processes as she was, Virgie saw enough to know that something was vitally wrong. This was not wood pulp in solution, but a sickening foamy brew that spun out on the filter paper Daniels spread beneath it.

"I have to believe you," Virgie said. "I don't know enough to know what's wrong—but something is, evidently. But—how could it have happened?"

"There could," Daniels said, "have been some chemical accident. Unlikely though, if you bought the stuff at the same place. Changes do occur—accidents in shipment, moisture, too much heat—but not often. But this seems to me too serious to be explained in that way. Something wrong has been added—my tests will show what it is when they're finished. Of course that may have been accidental, too—wrong label, something like that. There's always the human element, you know. Workmen make

mistakes and hide them. And then of course we have to consider the possibility that it was deliberate."

Virgie sat down abruptly on a leather-covered stool. Her legs were weak, all the vague misgivings she had felt assumed a definite shape of menace.

"You mean—somebody could have ruined that whole digester of pulp—deliberately? Put in something to destroy the fiber? How could that have happened? You keep the keys. You test everything."

"I did not, unfortunately, test the solvents on this run," Daniels admitted. "I haven't been doing it lately—they come sealed and they've always been perfect before. We depended on the reputation of the manufacturer. Of course, hereafter I'll test everything thoroughly—but that doesn't help us now."

"And in the meantime we lose a batch of pulp and have all the trouble of cleaning the digester out?"

"I'm afraid this lot is useless. I'm running every sort of test to be certain but in the meantime it looks pretty dubious."

Virgie let her breath out slowly. All sorts of odd, wild ideas seethed in her mind. Some one had ruined an expensive run of pulp, some one had it in for her—but why?

Vague rumors she had heard of communists at work in industrial regions, of sabotage and labor troubles fomented, she discounted. Her men had worked in the Morgan mill all their lives. Some of

them had helped David Morgan to build the plant, some of them sons of men who had laid the first bricks.

Repeatedly she had called them into conferences, during the black years of the depression, laying the facts before them, speaking their language. She had made sacrifices to keep the mill in operation when there was no profit for her, no possible way to show a profit. If the mill closed there was no other employment for them—and yet here was suspicion, sabotage and ugly doubt that rested, till she had proof and certain knowledge, upon every man in the mill.

Virgie hated the thought with the frightened hate of the innately kind and candid woman. She hated looking at Jerry and Hobe and the Spain boys, with speculation in her eyes. She loathed the feeling that hostile looks might be following her. Every man in the mill owed something to her—and yet people were funny!

Tell a man often enough that he was being cheated and exploited, and after a while he would begin to believe it. Even a man like Jerry Shelton, whose little boy was named David Morgan Shelton. Even Hobe Anderson. Virgie had assumed the mortgage on Hobe's place when the bank put pressure on him—but that fact, she knew, might easily become not the basis for Hobe's gratitude but for an obscure feeling of resentment. It was easy for a man to learn to hate a benefactor. A sense of obligation incubated

a kind of defensive anger from which strange, savage growths had been known to spring.

Hard to combat an insidious thing that was, after all, nothing more than a vague feeling. Virgie looked toward the scudding wintry sky and decided that David had escaped a lot of trouble mercifully, by dying. But David would have known what to do when obscure clouds descended. David, having no woman's sensitiveness, would have derided her present unease, her feeling of swooping hawk-wings somewhere behind mists, and gone trampling about in his direct and definite fashion, getting things done. David had had little imagination. She had too much, which was bad for business. Worrying herself into a state over an intangible was bad.

She went home at night, lost in a heavy, ruminative gloom.

To-morrow she would get to the bottom of this. Daniels was in an uncomfortable spot, and knew it. And there was no point in believing Daniels guilty. A man who would damage a pulp run in such a way as to bring instant suspicion upon himself was a loony nut, in Virgie's mind.

And as for the others, she knew in her heart that the diabolical cleverness of sadistic chemistry was beyond them. If Hobe or Jerry had wanted to do her dirt, they would have tossed a length of pipe into a grinder or smashed up the gears on the Jordan machine.

Somebody, if she believed Daniels, had tampered

with the stored solvents—and unless she brought in an outside chemist and had extensive and expensive experimentation done, she had to take Daniels' word.

But she had it out with Daniels, for the good of her soul, getting nowhere.

"You haven't been reading some of this red, radical stuff, have you," she demanded, "and got all fired up with the idea of saving the masses from the ravening capitalists by wrecking my mill?"

He had given her his slow, young, cool, and rather condescending smile at that. "How could I possibly benefit the masses by ruining your mill? Even if I had wanted to do it—which I didn't—I would have had too much respect for a good chemical formula to make a stinking mess out of it. And I hope I have too much intelligence to be taken in by that infantile rot the radicals circulate."

So that had been the end of that, and Virgie believed him, just as in her heart she believed Hobe and Jerry and all the rest. To-morrow she would have everything analyzed. To-morrow she would have the stores and containers searched. To-morrow she would blow up the chemical companies by wire and raise a loud and gusty wind in every quarter. But to-night she was tired.

She changed her clothes and went down to her big chair that faced David Morgan's picture and still had the print of David Morgan's head in the leather of the back. David looked tired, too, she thought. David was out of it all. He was lucky.

Marian sat, moodily, in front of the fire staring into the blaze.

"You," sighed Virgie, sinking into the cushions with a groan, "are a cheerful sight for tired eyes! If a merry laugh or a song ever sounded in this room I suppose I'd drop dead from shock. What were you doing over at the jail?"

"I went over to bring Tom back. He wouldn't come."

"Being locked up on a criminal charge, that is kind of odd."

"You were going to arrange bail for him. Lon Hicks said so. But Tom wouldn't come."

"I suppose you had to take young Wills along in case you needed somebody to carry Tom's baggage—his other bandana! Did Wills mention that he's working for me? Not that it matters, but now and then we do run off a batch of pulp when we can get a little coöperation from the gentlemen I employ."

"Mother, don't be so prickly! I took Mr. Wills over there because Lossie said the people in town were saying you had fired Tom and given Wills Tom's job. I thought perhaps Tom might have heard it. I hope you don't think I took him because I enjoyed his company?"

Virgie looked at her daughter levelly. Her heart gave a little jerk. Like every other mother she had postponed stubbornly admitting to herself her child's maturity; she had put off the inevitable hour of change when some man should desire her child for

his own. For days she had been seeing through Branford Wills clearly and she had not been displeased. She liked his straightforwardness, the trace of iron in him, the strong and gentle way he had with women. But there was no seeing through Marian. Virgie admitted to herself that her child was a dark-eyed enigma to her mother. And in her present state of mind, nerve-taut and weary, puzzles were irritating.

"Do you mean to tell me that you don't know that that chap is in love with you?" she demanded. "Have I raised up a daughter with no more feminine intuition than a—ground turtle? Why—Lossie knows more than that! Or am I supposed to be just a nice stupid old mother, blind as a bat?"

Marian's eyes darkened and her face changed queerly. There was a little convulsion of her lips that was a tremor of pain, but Virgie was too spent and too exasperated to see.

"So that," Marian's voice crackled like ice, "is the cute little plot. He's in love with me so you give him a job in the mill. It's a Rollo book—the nice young man works his way up from sweeping the store and the mill owner's daughter is supposed to be all of a twitter because she gets a kind look. Unfortunately, Mother dear, you've been reading Dorothy Dix or seeing too many movies. Mr. Branford Wills happens not to be in love with me—as any observer can see with half an eye. Either half. And I happen not to be in love with him."

"That," Virgie mumbled aloud, when Marian had gone, "is what you could call a dramatic exit. Very satisfying—to the actor."

"Yes'm," said Lossie at the door, "did you say something to me, Mrs. Morgan?"

"I said that if you ever marry, Lossie, and raise children—teach 'em to tell the truth. When they're grown up they won't tell it—but it doesn't matter much. Too much truth-telling makes life simple—and simple things get dull. My life won't ever be dull—not with you listening at doors and Tom making a fool of himself and somebody putting destructive agents into the pulp. Shut the door, Lossie, and remember George Washington. He never told lies to his mother—not much, anyway!"

XV

BRANFORD WILLS went to his work at the mill in the morning like a young man riding to a crusade. There was about him, as he entered the gate, a feeling of going into battle. No tangible opposition presented itself, no definite hostility. The men were not friendly, but they were heavily polite and reserved, as he knew all mountain men to be until they were won over. Daniels was curt and indifferent but their work did not coincide and Wills, following the milling of the product through the plant, from the first removal of the bark to the warm brown rolls of wood-pulp rolled into storage, saw the chemist but seldom.

But on the snowy morning following his visit to the jail, Daniels emerged from his laboratory, his hands in the pockets of a stained jacket, and came to stand beside Wills who was watching a new couch blanket being spread on one of the big presses.

Daniels spoke without preamble. "You were down at the other end of the mill yesterday, Wills. Did you see any one fooling around the big vats—the digesters? We lost a batch of pulp through some funny business or other."

"I don't know all the men in the mill as yet,"

Wills said. "And I was out for two or three hours. The vats have padlocks, don't they?"

"That's it." Daniels frowned. "It's an inside job, evidently—without even a motive that we can discover. You haven't made any of these fellows sore, have you?"

Wills looked puzzled. "How could I? I've only been watching and listening. And if I made a man sore he'd be more likely to give me a poke in the jaw, wouldn't he, than to ruin a run of pulp?"

"It sounds reasonable. It's a mystery—and not so good for me because I carry the keys. Well, much obliged."

At shouted instructions from a lank man in overalls, Wills went to help smooth the thick blanket into place on the bed of the machine. But the odd unease of being pressed upon by strange and unfriendly forces persisted. He hated the feeling of defensiveness, of needing to justify himself in his own mind. He liked this job, and he had been swept up into admiration for the intrepid spirit of Virgie Morgan.

He had lost his own mother before he was twelve, but he knew that she would have been a valiant woman with a flash of indomitable courage in her eyes. Through her brief widowhood she had fastened in her son a calm disdain of fears, an adventuring urge toward new problems and new battles. The sparseness of the times had moved him to take a government job but his heart had never been in it.

Now the smoke scrawl of the Morgan mills on

the sky, the rank odor of chemicals, the thunder of the grinders and presses, answered something adventuring in his heart. And he wanted work—he needed it. Hard work that would shut out other things from his mind. Things like brown eyes with fires of scorn in them, red lips that quivered above the sweet yielding of a round chin.

All night he had lain without sleeping much, trying to keep from thinking of Marian Morgan. Then with daylight he had put her out of his mind, deliberately and grimly. She was, he told himself, cold, arrogant, self-complacent, and spoiled. She cared nothing for him or for any one but herself. He repeated these blasting opinions savagely, then felt a sick weakness return as he knew that he believed none of it, would have none of it, and would have fought savagely any man who dared such a suggestion. He had slept then, briefly, with the gipsy music that was this dark-eyed girl taunting and troubling him.

And now, as the mill clamor beat around him, he was certain that it was the remoteness, the indifference in her eyes that made this feeling of being on trial without a friend in court. He had to show her. He had to show her that he was something other than a lost and rather pathetic young man whom a big-hearted elderly woman had befriended.

A sudden sharp nausea caught him as his mind raced. Young men had been befriended by middle-aged women before—if she thought he was that

sort, an opportunist, a heel! He gave an involuntary jerk and Bud Spain yelled, "Hey!" But the yell was lost in other yells, rough and sudden and startling.

Frank Emmet banged the gears of the Jordan machine back, jumped and ran. Wills ran, too, and because the others were yelling, he yelled, too. Hobe Anderson was dragging a flat hose off a reel. Another man struggled with a fire extinguisher.

The smoke was pouring from a little oil house, built against the north wall of the mill. They kicked the door in, there were yells and men running into each other, and much coughing and hissing of chemicals. The smoke grew blacker, then turned white and sank to the ground. Wills's eyes were running scalding water but it was he who kicked the smoldering barrel in to the open, where Hobe Anderson knocked it over and sent it rolling with a stream from the hose.

"Take it easy!" Wills shouted at Hobe. "Cut that water off. Let's have a look at this."

A dozen hands jerked the charred, smoking staves of the barrel apart. A label, still intact, on its side, indicated that it had held bisulphide. In the bottom an oily mass still smoked acridly. Dragged out, it flared into flame briefly—a soaked, dangerous bundle of cotton rags and paper. Men stamped out the flame, looked at each other somberly.

"Somebody," announced Frank Emmet, "was fixing to burn the mill."

"Wind's wrong," Hobe said, kicking a smoking

heap into a pool of water, "or she'd have went sure. Looks like if anybody wanted to burn her they'd have figured on the wind."

Wills was aware of Lucy Fields's white face near to his elbow.

"It was set, wasn't it?" she said.

"Obviously. Though, even if the barrel had burned, there might not have been serious damage. That little building is more or less air-tight. The fire probably would have smoldered out."

"But why would any one want to set fire to the mill? The town would be ruined if it was destroyed."

"Why," Daniels cut in, "would any one want to spoil the pulp? Something's wrong somewhere. Where is Mrs. Morgan?"

"She went to Asheville to see Tom Pruitt's lawyers. I'd better telephone her."

"I wouldn't," Wills said. "The fire is out. Why worry her? She has troubles enough already."

"That's true. I won't tell her. You'd better clean this up, Frank."

"Let's have a look at it first." Wills looked at Daniels. "We can find out perhaps where this stuff came from."

For an instant Wills sensed an edge of hesitation in Daniels' manner. His eyes flicked around, then were as quickly guarded. But his voice was carefully casual when he answered, "Not much left—but there may be a clue."

"Somebody," old Frank was terse, "has shore got it in for somebody in this mill."

The men straggled back to work, grumbling among themselves, but Wills and Lucy Fields followed Stanley Daniels into the laboratory.

"Kerosene," Daniels stated as he turned the smoky, foul-smelling scraps over in his little sink. "Might have come from any cross-roads store—and cotton rags. Burned past any hope of identification. Luke May might make something out of it"—he grinned thinly—"but criminology is out of my line."

"It makes me a little sick," Lucy said. "Why in the world would anybody want to harm Mrs. Morgan or the mill?"

"There's a reason, of course." Daniels was brisk. "Sooner or later it will come to light—then we can do something about it."

Wills went back to his work at the Jordan machine. It was an hour later that one of the Spain boys came to him and said, "Lucy wants to see you. In the office."

Wills crossed the yard to the little structure that stood so bleakly alone. Lucy Fields sat at her little desk, and her face went first red and then white as Wills came in.

"Sit down, please," she faltered a little, then plunged rapidly. "Mr. Wills, I'm doing a very bold thing—asking you to come here. But I had to talk to you. There's—nothing else to do."

"I see. And what was it you wanted to say to me?" He took the chair opposite—the chair that still bore the imprints of David Morgan's shoulder-blades.

Her throat fluttered. A strained look came over her small wistful face.

"This is such a little town," she began. "It's rather awful to live in such a gossipy little place. It isn't easy—what I have to say—to make it clear, I mean. About the town. About the mill. It belongs to the town—to all of us, Mr. Wills. The men who work here have been here always. Nobody ever came in from outside till Mr. Daniels came last year."

"What is it you're trying to tell me?" Wills asked bluntly. "That I'm an outsider? That somehow or other I am to blame for the trouble in the mill?"

She swallowed again, and tears misted her eyes.

"It sounds dreadful, doesn't it? But—there is just nothing else to think. We've never had trouble before—not even in the worst times of the depression when pulp piled up because there was no market for it, and all the men were on half pay."

"Why," Wills asked, "should any one wish to burn the mill because of me?"

Lucy twisted her thin fingers anxiously. "I know it sounds crazy, but honestly—I can't think of any other explanation. Our men here in the mill are—different, Mr. Wills. They're mountain men. This is a clannish place. Most of the families around here

have been on the same land for four or five generations. They wouldn't like a stranger put in over them—men who have spent their lives working for the Morgans."

"And so your suggestion is that I leave town in haste and never come back!"

Tears ran down her pale face. "I know I sound like a fool to you, but Mrs. Morgan has been a mother to me—to all of us. We've all fought and worked and struggled together—always for the mill."

"All but the fellow who poured oil on the newspapers and ruined the pulp. He was fighting for himself."

"Perhaps he thought he was fighting for the mill. Perhaps he thought that outsiders would be coming in to take it away from us. He might have thought that you were the first."

"It sounds fantastic. But it may be true. I'll talk to Mrs. Morgan—and you can be sure I won't let the mill be destroyed on my account."

"Oh—please don't talk to Mrs. Morgan! Please—just go! You can make some excuse—you had a job, you can say you are going back to it. You could say you had changed your mind."

"I'm sorry—I couldn't leave without talking to Mrs. Morgan. I'm very much indebted to her."

"But—this is a way to pay your debt, don't you see? If trouble ended, that would be the best possible thing that could happen to Mrs. Morgan. To feel

that people are working against you—secretly—that's so horrible. And she's so worried about Tom. I can't think what made him do such a wild thing."

"I understand you, Miss Fields. And you can be sure that if I'm convinced that I'm in any way to blame, I'll leave immediately."

"I don't know any way to convince you except by telling you, Mr. Wills. I've lived here always. I know these people."

"I hope," Wills smiled, briefly, "that Mrs. Morgan appreciates the loyalty of her secretary."

She stood up. "We appreciate her, anyway. You won't tell her that I talked to you? Please, please don't ever tell her! She's so independent—she doesn't want help. She wants to fight things out for herself. And I think she's tired—I get sorry for her sometimes."

"That's why she asked me to stay—because she was tired. I'm a little vague in my mind just now—but I think I'm staying, Miss Fields."

"I appealed to you," she sighed. "It's all I can do. But—if you *were* convinced—"

"I've told you what I would do."

"Mr. Wills—there isn't a thing personal in this! I'd be glad if you'd stay. I think it would be fine to have some one new in the mill—some one with ideas—"

"Thanks very much." He stood up. "I'll think over what you have told me. But—I rather think I shan't run away, Miss Fields. Running doesn't ap-

peal to me. You're so likely to get hit in the back—and that's hard to explain convincingly."

"I've—appealed to you," she repeated in a wan voice.

"You've done your part. Whatever happens—I'm to blame."

"I hope nothing happens. I hope I'm wrong." She smiled thinly.

But there was a dubious uneasiness in her heart, as Wills went away. Had Stanley Daniels been a little odd—a trifle curt and watchful? He couldn't know anything about this affair—and yet, he alone carried the keys.

Lucy was heavily unhappy as she walked home alone that night. Life could be so hopeless, so ghastly when you lived in a shabby old house at the end of a shabby street. When you were so achingly in love!

XVI

MARIAN MORGAN had driven her little car up a twisting stretch of ridge road, without having any very definite idea of where she was going or why.

Lately she had been tormented by a nagging restlessness, a distaste for everything that had formerly pleased her. Her thoughts kept drifting back to questions that had no answers, to silly longings and impulses that had no place in the mind of a cool-headed girl, who had inherited considerable acumen and hard common sense from a Scotch father.

She drove slowly because she told herself that it was thrifty to spare tires on a rocky, boulder-edged track. She searched the hills above and below with her eyes, but not even to herself would she admit that she looked for anything. She had heard her mother telephoning instructions that morning, but she had kept her mind sternly on her breakfast grapefruit and adjured herself not to listen. What did it matter where the woods truck went or who went with it?

Not even Lossie knew where she was. She had said something vague about going over the mountain to Sally Gallup's house to decide about plays. It came to her that if she wrecked the car down one of these sharp descents she might lie there for days


and freeze and die before she was found. Then she looked along a slope where little mounds of earth held each the feathery beginning of a spruce tree, and saw, far off between the laurel thickets, the lift and flash and quick descent of a mattock. Swiftly at that Marian Morgan became, not the daughter of David Morgan whose forbears had been reared in the kirk, but the actress Sally had recommended her to be.

She slipped out of the car, dragged the cushion out and rummaged for the pump, set it up on the ground. With a nail-file from her purse she pressed down the valve of a front tire, let the air escape until the tire sagged, loose and flabby, a discouraging flummox of limp rubber. Then she climbed back into the car, wrapped the rug around her knees and sat in a small, cold huddle waiting.

Instantly, now that the thing was done, a hundred accusing and condemning voices clamored in her ears. She was being cheap, she was doing the sort of shallow trick that a girl of Lossie's class might devise, she was forgetting that she was the daughter of Virgie Morgan of the Morgan mills. But drawing out all these self-reproaches was the thin, poignant cry that had trembled through her heart and beat in her blood since the night she had talked to her mother before the fire.

"I have to *know*!" she said, plaintively, aloud. "I know it isn't true—but I have to be sure!"

This contradictory patching up of her conscience



helped her to be calm, to wait, though her feet tingled with cold. A mountain jay came and shrieked at her from a sumac clump. A deer stood for an instant, tense and listening under some gnarled ancient apple-trees beside the ruin of a stone chimney. Then suddenly he bounded away. There was a metallic vibration through the woods. The truck was starting. She caught the backfire of a cold engine and the clank of shovels tossed aboard, and leaned her elbow on the button of her horn. The blare made the jays and the little pine sparrows and crossbills scatter with a whirring and snapping of twigs.

Then the rusty radiator appeared over the rise emitting steam. Joe had let the engine run hot on the grade. He was always doing that, too impatient to cool it out properly when they reached the top of a long climb.

Two men jumped down when they saw Marian's car, and came running. One was Joe. The other was Branford Wills. Swiftly Marian put every scruple out of her mind. She was a woman, using a woman's devious and often unfair weapons.

She said, "I'm stuck. That miserable old tire insists on going flat. And I left the key to the spare in my other purse. Isn't mother with you? I thought she came up here. There's a long-distance call for her—I came up to tell her."

"She didn't come with us. She must be at the mill," Wills said. "Let's have a look at that tire."

"It's flat, all right." Joe gave the wheel a kick.

"But there's still a little air in it. Maybe we can pump it up so you can get down to the road."

Wills had on new corduroy riding pants, Marian noted, and a leather coat with a sheepskin collar turned up about his ears. His service hat was jerked over his eyes and the wind had whipped color into his thinned face. He looked brisk and military and competent and assured. Beside him Joe, who was the most personable of the young men in the mill, appeared to be what he was, a nice country boy with a muscular body and a willing spirit. Marian's heart scudded a little, then her cool control returned, though her breath was still quick.

They pumped up the tire, and Joe studied it, testing the valve.

"Must be a pressure leak," he said. "Valve's all right. Can you turn around here without getting stuck?"

"I think so—I'll try."

"You better do it," Joe said to Wills. "It's steep off there. She could turn over easy."

Marian slid along meekly. "I'm a lot of trouble," she said in a voice which would have amazed her mother, so humble was it.

"No trouble." Wills whipped the steering-wheel about. "This is a bad place to turn. Flag for me, Joe," he shouted.

"O.K. Cut deep." Joe semaphored his arms.

The car came about. Wills got out again to look at the tire.

"Standing up all right," he announced. "You'll make it."

Marian's throat cramped. But she fought its quivering, got the words out.

"Would you drive it down for me? The tire might go down again and I'm not much good at the pump."

"Of course." He resumed the wheel again, while Joe followed with the truck. "You shouldn't be driving on lonely mountain roads alone, you know," he said, as they bumped over a wooden bridge.

"No one would hurt me," she declared. "Everybody for miles around knows me—knows mother. And mother hasn't any enemies."

"She has one, obviously," Wills said. "The fellow who kindled a fire in the oil house at the mill yesterday wasn't celebrating the Fourth of July. He was getting even."

Marian looked thoughtful. "Perhaps that wasn't mother's enemy."

"That might be true." He drove the little car carefully around a slippery hair-pin turn. "But even without enemies there are dangers. This morning, for instance. Suppose you had had to walk back to the highway? Suppose the truck had not been on the ridge?"

"I knew the truck was on the ridge." Marian was truthful. "That's why I came. Does this catechism and fatherly admonition have to go on indefinitely? We could talk about other things. I'm fairly intel-

ligent. I know all the tenses and that you shouldn't say ain't."

"I'd better take another look at that tire." Wills stopped on a wide bit of road, waved the truck past. It roared down grade, flinging mud cheerfully.

Marian sat, looking straight ahead, her cameo profile a trifle grim, her chin squared.

"There's nothing the matter with the tire," she said. "I wanted to talk to you."

He looked at her quickly, searchingly. She was so near—and so dear! Even with her chin set at a resolute angle, even with her eyes cool and distant and her lashes evasive. He made an impulsive move, then drew back as her aloof manner did not change.

"I'm listening," he said quietly.

She twisted her fingers together, but kept her eyes straight ahead—on the thickets where the jays quarreled and the frozen slopes where icicles made a diamond passementerie on every rock and twig.

"I don't like fighting," she began with a little difficulty. "We seem to clash. And it's rather silly, don't you think?"

"Very silly. Especially when—"

"Especially when we could arrange things sensibly. I—this isn't easy for me to say. But—I thought if I talked to you—alone—if I appealed to you—"

He stiffened a little. Only the day before Lucy Fields had used those same words. "I've appealed to you!" For a moment eagerness, tenderness had

rushed through his blood like flame. He had looked at Marian and seen only her young sweetness, the golden curve of her throat where kisses were born to lie, the yielding curve of her lips. But now the pride in him, that verged so close to a high, fine fury, the terrible, blind, masculine pride, that through a thousand centuries has gone flaunting banners and waving swords and trampling small tender things underfoot, had him again.

He could not see the pulse that quivered where a gold shadow lay upon her throat, he did not see the uncertainty of her fingers and her eyelids quivering. He saw only her profile, set against him, the chin that was like David Morgan's. He was blind and savage with hurt and frozen with disappointment. He was a very stupid young man.

He drew back and swung the car wide on a curve, not looking at her.

"I think I know what you're going to say. I've heard it all, already. I only have one answer. I'm not leaving town. I'm not leaving the mill. I'm not going to be driven out—nor wheedled out. I'm in this to stay. So—it's too bad you went to so much trouble to let the air out of that tire!"

She turned, as though she had been struck, but he did not see. Her face was as white and stiff as his own. Her voice snicked like steel on ice.

"You're a very famous egotist, aren't you?" she said, brutally. "You couldn't possibly think beyond yourself for a moment. It wouldn't occur to you that

I might not want to talk about the mill. That I might be thinking—of myself a little. I won't say it now. I won't let you gloat over the kind of a fool that I was. I see—how hopeless it is!" She choked a little, then recovered her control, gave a savage drag at the brake, turned the key.

Wills said, "Marian! Good God!" But she was not listening. Her eyes were black and blazing. She reached across his knees as the car lurched to a stop, and opened the door.

"Get out, will you?" she said hoarsely. "I can't stand any more."

He said "Marian!" again, in a husky, stricken voice, but she was like a woman on fire.

"Get out! I hate you! Get out!"

She snatched at the wheel, whirled away with frosty mud flying, almost before he was on the ground. Down the winding road she swung past the truck, grazing a hemlock tree, careening on two wheels.

"You'd better wait for him," she shouted at the startled Joe. "He isn't riding with me."

Down the mountain she tore blindly, shame and a white, torturing pain burning her. Once she laughed and the laugh was bitter.

So—he was in love with her, was he? She was a song sung to a gipsy tambourine.

Cheap—cheap—to have surrendered even a little! She hated him! She hated him!

As for Branford Wills, he sat morosely in the

jolting truck and hated himself for a blundering fool.

Now—with his crass stupidity he had ruined what life with its ruthless distinctions had not made intolerable before.

At the mill gate the truck halted.

"Something's busted again," announced Joe grimly.

Somehow, the spur track had been undermined. A car, heavily loaded with pulp, had gone off the rails, swung sidewise, and turned over, tearing up a hundred yards of track.

"This here," declared Joe, "is gittin' so it ain't even funny!"

XVII

VIRGIE took a letter that Lucy handed her, unfolded the single sheet of cheap gray paper, read it through twice. The envelop was marked "Personal." The handwriting was angular and labored, the script of one who expresses himself in writing only at rare intervals.

"Did you take a look at this?" she asked.

"No, Mrs. Morgan. It was marked personal—I opened the envelop but I didn't look at the letter."

"It's from Wallace Withers. He wants to come to my house to-night to talk business, so he says."

Lucy brightened. "Then he has decided to sell that Bennett spruce. He'll try to get three prices out of you, Mrs. Morgan."

"He's sure to try something. I've known Wallace all my life—the old scorpion. The last time he came to see me he tried to talk me into marrying him because he said I didn't know enough to run this mill."

"But—you couldn't! Why, Mrs. Morgan, his poor first wife never did come to town. I don't suppose she ever had more than one decent dress in her whole married life."

"I didn't marry him, did I? I may be getting soft in a few spots, but not in that one. Lucy, you listen.

I want you to come out to that conference. If Withers has any idea of selling that spruce I want a record of it. He'll try to work some kind of racket. You can make notes of everything. He says he wants to talk business—well, when I talk business my secretary is present. I'll have Marian there, too. I'd like to have young Wills—where is he?"

"He went up in the woods with the truck."

"Well, I'm glad somebody went besides me. Marian thinks I look like an old fool trailing around in the mud, climbing over timber and wading creeks, a fat old woman like me. Anyway, it's a poor executive who can't get somebody to do the dirty work."

"You're not a poor executive, Mrs Morgan. Nobody else could have pulled the mill through—"

"I know. You've told me. I reckon I'd better not have Wills out. You can handle anything that needs to be done. I'll send the car after you."

Wills would probably refuse to come to the house, anyway, because of Marian. Marian's attitude was still an enigma to her mother. Marian had always been a bright gift that Virgie was grateful for, but a gift that left her bewildered and a little uncertain and abashed. She found herself constantly contriving to please Marian or to avoid her displeasure, and this was all wrong, of course. Nonsense, being bossed around by ninety-odd pounds of black-eyed girl, but that was the foolishness of mothers. And mothers loved it. They put up a spiritless fight against the

dainty tyranny, the disturbing sense of inferiority, the whims and humors forced upon them by their young.

When they did fight they came off bad seconds, usually, and were pitifully patient about that.

Lucy, on the other side of the desk, was swallowing nervously and the red was coming up into her cheeks and throat.

"Mrs. Morgan," she began, in a little rush, "if you think it would be wise, Mr. Daniels might come to the conference to-night?"

"What for?" Virgie asked, bluntly. "Wallace Withers is an old sourpuss, I know that—but I don't need a chemist to find out how acid he is."

"You spoke about Mr. Wills—" Lucy bridled slightly.

"Wills has got that spruce to cut, if I buy it. But I may not buy it. I'd like to let old Withers talk himself blue in the gills and then just blandly tell him we don't need his timber—the worst about that is, we do need it."

"We can run another month on what we have in," Lucy was ready with her little book, "and then we could begin thinning on the Bobcat Run stuff."

"I don't want to cut on Bobcat. Not for another year if I can help it. Call up Bryson, Lucy, and ask him if he has any of that cider left that hasn't got too darned explosive. There might be a way to limber up old Withers. Most every man has a loose joint somewhere."

"I don't believe Mr. Withers has any. He's made like one of these dry land turtles—all shell and claws and mouth and no soft spot."

"You're real bright at times, Lucy," Virgie applauded. "Just don't forget to be bright—that's all. It's that fifteen-minute interval when a woman forgets that God puts brains inside her head as well as eyelashes on the side of it that ruins a lot of 'em."

"I won't forget."

She will though, Virgie thought, wearily, as she crossed the yard to back her old car out of the shed. That cool-headed young chap from Missouri would give Lucy two languishing looks and reduce her instantly to the compliant softness of a vanilla custard. But the Lord, so Virgie decided, looked after the soft women. It was the tough ones who could take it who had a hard time. The soft ones lay back and whimpered and swiftly somebody else jumped up, with a gallant flourish to carry their load and help them over the steep places.

"But an old battle-ax like me can change her own tires or get herself out of holes. Nobody bothers!"

The sun was dropping behind the black rampart of the mountains as Virgie drove homeward.

The eastern slopes sank into purple shadows, the valleys were lost in a citron-colored mist. But beyond the aloof crests, cold-looking and forbidding now as the mountains are in winter, a saffron line of light burned along the sky. Virgie admired the brilliance briefly, considered the fact that the Almighty

seemed to take a lot of trouble to make every act of nature splendid and beautiful. Trees could have been dirty brown or gray, but they weren't. Even stripped of their leaves they were interesting and graceful.

And rocks were softened and made lovely by lichen and waterfall, ferns and the mystery of shadows. Storms, too, were beautiful. The piling anger of the clouds, the fiery skeleton bones of lightning, the silver marching of the rain. And fire—though it had the color of terror, had glory. There was the pink and purple of laurel and rhododendron in the spring, the white candelabra of dogwood set in the forests in spring, the flame of azalea.

Only in making man had the fine brush and chisel of the creator slipped. Men were a sorry piece of work, so Virgie thought. Dreary to look at, most of them, full of silly hates and greedinesses, schemes to defeat and destroy each other, all to no profit.

Wars and politics, angers and absurdities, these men had made; going on their scrambling way, adding little to the beauty and serenity of the world. The black scald, bristling with broken, burned trunks and charred stumps—men had done that. Mank Pressly had a still up there somewhere, and his fire had got away from him, burned up the still and six kegs of raw whisky before it tore down the ridge to ruin four or five hundred acres of fair timber. And with it had gone thousands of Virgie's little seedling trees.

Surveying this blackened, months-old ruin, Virgie thought of Tom. The man Cragg lived on, and Tom stubbornly refused to be released from the jail. He was a fanatic old fool, he had gone a little mad as lonely old men sometimes do. And here was Wallace Withers scheming to cheat her and she was alone, with no one to go to for the steadying courage that comes with approval.

Fires were burning in the house, for a wonder, and Marian was curled in a big chair under her father's portrait. Marian stayed alone too much lately, was too still.

"Wallace Withers is coming here to-night to sell me some timber," Virgie said at dinner. "I want you to go and get Lucy—then both of you stay around. I don't trust that old man and I want somebody to hear every word that he says."

"Why doesn't he come to the office if he wants to talk business? Why does he come to the house?" Marian asked.

Virgie was a little bothered to find an answer for this. It was incredible, of course, that Wallace might still be harboring some mad idea that his proposal would again be listened to.

"I don't know," she said. "He wrote me a letter. I'm telling you what he said. He's come here before."

"That's just it. Mother"—Marian sat up a little straighter and looked a trifle grim—"doesn't it ever

occur to you that you are supposed to be a wealthy widow?"

Virgie buttered a biscuit, her mouth dragged into a dry grin.

"If anything like that did occur to me, all I'd have to do is go down to the bank and have a heart-to-heart talk with some facts and figures. That's about the most awakening thing I know of. What is all this? Have you seen a peacock-blue roadster you can't live without?"

"I'm not talking about myself. I'm talking about Wallace Withers. He hasn't any wife. He isn't an old man—not terribly old—"

"Oh—that!" Virgie was scornful. "He got ideas—weeks ago. He did ask me to marry him. I guess he knows by now that I'm not interested."

"And you refused him?" Marian asked sharply.

"Did you want him for a stepfather? I didn't think you'd like going over there to live in that moldy old house with no lights and no well."

"Heavens, no! But, Mother"—Marian's voice rose almost to a wail—"you never mentioned it! You never told me! If anything like that happened to me I'd tell you—"

"Would you? I seem to remember a Renfro boy, one time—"

"Oh, that awful infant! As though I would consider a boy like that!"

"Well, I'm not considering Wallace Withers

either. Nor anybody else. I felt like a fool—he made me mad and I went off in one of my tantrums—then young Wills came stumbling in here and so much has happened since I forgot all about it.”

Marian’s eyes cooled, withdrew, then turned upon her mother intently.

“It hasn’t occurred to you, has it, Mother, that all these things that have happened—ugly, destructive things that have never happened to us before—began after you hired Branford Wills to work in the mill?”

“What?” Virgie straightened up, the poker in her hand. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking”—Marian went on a little breathlessly—“about ruined pulp and fires set to burn the plant, about tracks being torn up, and cars wrecked and shipments delayed. They could be significant, couldn’t they? They could mean that the men who’ve worked for you forever don’t want to work with your arrogant young Mr. Wills!”

“There could be,” Virgie said slowly, “a wilder idea than that. There could be. But I doubt if there ever was. How could any crazy nut believe that he could get rid of Wills by ruining me? And why are you so poisonous against Wills anyway? He’s a nice chap. He can be a lot of help to me.”

A sick, ugly doubt crept like a foul-footed creature through Marian Morgan’s mind. Older women did get sentimental ideas about young men. It couldn’t be—she fought the thought away furiously.

Her splendid, courageous, capable mother—low, to let such a suspicion creep into her brain. She breathed deep, and threw back her head, and because her own hurt was still raw and wincing, because she had to ignore and defeat it or be tortured endlessly, she managed a cool remoteness.

"It was an idea I had. I don't think it's insane. I think it's quite reasonable," Marian said as she walked to the door, her eyes more like David's than ever.

Lucy settled herself with her note-book and pencil when Marian brought her back, scarlet spots in her cheeks, her eyes as excited as though she was about to attend a séance.

Marian said, "Do I have to listen when old Withers comes or is it all right to go on reading?"

"You don't have to listen unless you want to. I just want plenty of people around when I have to talk to that old scoot."

"Why on earth are you so nervous, Mother, if it's just a business deal?"

"I'm not nervous!" snapped Virgie, putting down the ashtray she was fiddling with. "Why should I be nervous?"

"You have been—I've noticed it for days. You know it, Mother."

"It's because so many things are happening," defended Lucy brightly. "I'm nervous myself. Every time I open a filing cabinet I halfway expect a bomb to go off."

"You've been listening to mystery plays on the radio," Marian drawled.

"We don't have a radio," Lucy returned, calmly.

Wallace Withers came promptly. He had on his funeral suit, he was blue-shaven and rather pompous. He looked doubtful when Marian and Lucy Fields were introduced.

"I came up here to talk business—" he began.

"Lucy knows all my business," Virgie was short, "and you can talk before my daughter."

Withers settled himself, a bit uneasily, in David Morgan's high-backed chair. Virgie sat, straight and uncompromising, on the opposite side of the fire. She had regained her poise, she felt cool again, in command. Wallace Withers was just another countryman with a shrewd way of getting along. She had handled enough men like him in her career. They began being clumsily gallant, usually, then tried to outsmart her.

Wallace Withers put his long fingers together.

"I've got a matter of some importance to discuss," he began. "I reckon you know what it is?"

"I suppose it's Perry Bennett's timber. You knew I was trading for that piece so you skinned around and got in ahead of me. That wasn't a neighborly thing to do. What do you want for it?" Virgie wasted no words.

Withers studied his knuckles elaborately. "I didn't come up here to talk about the Bennett timber, Virgie. It ain't for sale. I got other things on my mind.

I reckon you've heard that two fellers from up east—name of Hooper and Payne—have got claims allowed by the court on that piece of stuff Tom Pruitt claims he owns, on Hazel Fork?"

"I heard it. But they won't timber it. I went over day before yesterday and filed foreclosure suits for Tom. So if you got roped into that business and came up here to argue about it, Wallace, you might as well save your breath. Tom's in jail, but he isn't friendless. He's an old man—a mountain man—and he dealt with those skunks like a mountain man would do. But the law won't beat him out of what is his—not if I can help it."

"I didn't come here to talk about Pruitt, either," Wallace went on. "Though I might as well tell you your foreclosure suit won't interfere with Hooper and Payne—not likely. There's claims that come ahead of first mortgages—claims that have got priority in law."

"What claims?"

"Labor claims. A mechanics' lien supersedes most any other kind of claim—you know that, I reckon."

"When did any mechanic ever set foot on Hazel Fork?"

"There was roads built there—and gradin' done and gravel hauled—"

"Mighty sorry roads. And mighty little of them is left now."

"That ain't here nor there, Virgie. The men who built 'em never got paid."

"So this Hooper and Payne and that man Cragg, I suppose, bought up the labor claims?"

"The court allowed the claims they hold. They financed this Phillips' bunch and all they got was notes and liens—with Pruitt's lien standing ahead of 'em. They had to protect themselves. But they're business men—and they think this country has got a future. They think there's going to be money made over here—in lumber and in by-products."

"What did you come here to talk to me about?" Virgie demanded, abruptly, while Lucy made little frightened, scribbling marks on her paper. "When you talk by-products you mean pulp. What's on your mind?"

But Wallace refused to be hurried. He made a steeple with his long fingers, and looked at her blandly over the crest of it.

"There will be," he announced, in an oratorical tone, "big developments in this country—if you don't hinder them, Virgie Morgan."

"I? I've been developing the country myself, for a few years! I'd be the last person on earth to hinder anything that was for the good of this country. But—you aren't talking about the good of the country, Wallace Withers. You're frying fish of your own—and I want plain talk, not speeches. What's your proposition?"

"With big business men getting behind things, in this county," he went on, still pompously, "I figure

to travel with them, Virgie! Not fight 'em or oppose 'em. I don't aim to fight progress. I aim to get into it and make money along with the rest. So I come up here to talk business to you. I figure to buy your mill!"

XVIII

THERE was an instant's silence.

Virgie sat without moving. Marian gave a little startled gasp and Lucy said, vaguely, "Why—"

Then Virgie snorted. "I reckon I'll just have to go on standing in the way of progress, Wallace. Because you won't get my mill."

Withers hitched forward, his eyes showing points of anger.

"I reckon you didn't understand me, Virgie. I want your mill—and I'm going to get it. I've got money behind me—big money. I can get the timber and I can get the markets. I figure on getting into the pulp business."

"And just how," Virgie asked deliberately, "do you plan to get possession of my mill?"

"I figure to buy it—at a fair price, taking account of the depreciation in the value of the stock *and* the depreciation of the property. I got a right to do it." Slow red crept up into his face. "I figure to buy that property and improve it."

"It needs improvement, does it?"

"You know the shape that mill's in! Look here, what's that Fields girl writing down everything I say for?"

"This is a business conference. You said so yourself. I may not know enough to run a pulp mill but I do know enough to run a business conference. Lucy's taking notes because I told her to do it."

"You'd better take a note of this, Virgie—I'm offering an opportunity to sell. If you won't sell—then I figure to put you out of business!"

"You did some fancy figuring, didn't you, Wallace? You must have strained your mind, getting all those high aims and ambitions into language. Too bad it's all going to waste—all that brain power. You could run for something and maybe get elected if you put all your eloquence on the job. As it is, you're just wasting your breath. My mill won't be for sale—to-morrow nor any other day. Not so long as I can find a green stick in this country to grind into pulp. So—this business conference seems to me to be practically over!"

He stood up and Lucy, watching in a sort of fascinated awe over her note-book, saw that his hands trembled. His lips drew back a little showing his yellow teeth.

"Your mill will be for sale, Virgie Morgan! If it ain't for sale to-day—it will be. It will be! I don't figure to be balked in what I set out to do. Not by anybody. You better do a little thinking, Virgie. You'll sell to me—reasonable—or I'll get capital and put you out of business. Now I'll thank you for my hat."

She had not, Virgie thought thankfully, after-

ward, put him out of the house. She had kept her temper and she had kept her head. But when he had gone rattling away in his old car, she strode the length of the room and punched the fire savagely.

"The old pea-hen! The old ant-eater! Put me out of business, will he? My mill's falling in, is it?"

From a corner came Marian's worried voice. "He might do it, Mother."

"He might do it?" Virgie was grateful for an outlet for her sizzling wrath. "He might run for Congress—he might try to blow up Whiteside Mountain, too. But where would he get? Nowhere! He's trying to bluff me out—the penny-pinching old hound dog! He's sore because he couldn't marry my mill and get it without putting out a cent. I know Wallace Withers. I've known him most of his life—as well as though I had stirred up the mud to make him!"

"But the mill is shabby, Mother. All the metal roofing is rusty and the mortar falling out of the bricks—and Tom has propped up the fence in a dozen places."

Red burned in Virgie's cheeks. Her eyes shot blue sparks.

"I should spend money to fancy up the mill on the outside when the men aren't back on full pay yet! When I can't even discount my bills! Your father never asked for more than thirty days in his life—and I'm thankful if I can get anything paid off in ninety."

"We only took sixty for the new parts for the Jordan machine, Mrs. Morgan."

"Much obliged, Lucy. Stick with me, will you? I seem to need a couple of friends."

"Father," Marian persisted, "had old-fashioned ideas—you know that, Mother. He was too conservative for these times."

Virgie looked up at David's picture—at the straight, strong, judicial line of his lips, at his thoughtful, cautious eyes. The look heartened her, stopped the odd quivering in her knees, the shaken cold anger that tore at her. David was with her. He had died but he had not taken his spirit away from the mill. It walked there, stood over the blow pits and the great digesters and deckers, where the raw pulp was steamed and thinned and ground and dried—fine fiber that would one day be milled into missals for nuns or paper on which letters would be written to old mothers.

She gave David a look that reached a hand to him through this strange gloom, this shadow which was as fearsome and intangible as the swoop of a hawk through the wind.

"Your father's way was an old-fashioned way," she said, "but so are a lot of things old-fashioned. Things like good credit and a good name, things like fairness and honor and decent dealing. They've invented some smart methods but they've never invented anything that takes the place of those old-fashioned things!"



"We could paint the roller mill," suggested Lucy faintly. "We could let the boys work on it slack days."

"And have Wallace Withers walk by and see that he's got us scared? Let him build his pulp mill. I'm not going to be stampeded into changing my ways. Morgan pulp is known wherever men make paper. Nobody gives a darn if it's milled in a pole shack with a brush roof. It's good pulp. Lucy, you put all this in the form of a report. I might want to prove some time that old Withers threatened me. I'm going to call that lawyer to-night and go over to see Tom the first thing in the morning and enjoin those crooks from cutting that timber."

Marian stood up, slim and grave and gallant. "All right, Mother—if you're going to fight, we'll fight with you."

Virgie's grimness melted and her eyes misted briefly.

"I was just standing here wishing to the Lord that I had a son. Life gets pretty thick for a woman, sometimes. But—if we hang together we can beat 'em. You go now, Marian, and take Lucy home. Make Lossie go with you—I don't want you coming back on that road alone."

"Mother, I've driven it alone a hundred times!"

"I know that. And I've been making pulp for years, but now all of a sudden somebody takes a notion to burn down the mill."

Though she rose at intervals to take bromides,

Virgie could not sleep. Her battling spirit was roused, she found herself clenching her fists in the dark, making up savage and telling speeches and muttering fragments of them aloud.

The thin, blue winter dawn came late. She had already given up hope of rest when the east began to be pearl and aquamarine. She got up and dressed, putting on her good blue suit, her best silk blouse. She would have preferred going into action in her old corduroys and boots, but this fight to-day was to be one of wits, of law and shrewdness—not to be conducted in a disreputable old hat jerked belligerently over one eye.

At least, thank goodness, her enemy was now standing forth in the open. The secret hawk that beat dark wings between her and the sky was a thing of form and definition.

And she felt sure that if she could keep Payne and Hooper and Wallace Withers from getting possession of the timber area on Hazel Fork, she could defeat their schemes. She knew every inch of land, every standing tree, every foot of available pulp wood for a hundred miles around. What little Wallace Withers owned, even counting the acreage he had bought from Perry Bennett, would not go far. No man in his right mind would put money into a mill, with so scant a supply as that in prospect. And the rest, except for Tom's rich heritage, was tied up by leases by power concerns or lumber people—or by the great Champion mill, except what she herself controlled.

She knew that Wallace Withers would extend himself to destroy her. No pestilence ever set loose in any clime could work the havoc wrought by an ignorant, bigoted man, working ruthlessly for his own ends, especially when under this fierce, cold passion for eminence there burned the moving fury of a personal spite. Wallace was a vain and unscrupulous man, disdained. No ethics would deter him, no reasoning touch him. He would break her if he could, because only by reducing her to suppliant meekness could he rebuild the brittle tower of his own prime conceit.

She made a cup of coffee, in the kitchen, and drank it black and hot. Lossie came scuffing in in bedroom slippers, her hair plastered stiffly in a net.

"My goodness," she exclaimed, "you going to the mill this early? Whyn't you call me to get you some breakfast?"

"I'll eat later. I've got a lot to do. I don't know when I'll be back."

Her old car roared down the hill. The early morning fog was lying in great white scarves of feathers down the slopes of the mountains. The steam of the mill drifted like wings against a dawn-quickenened sky, as she approached the gate.

Suddenly she found herself deeply moved, loving that shambling building, the windows burning in the wan, wintry sun, the ranked piles of wood, even the choking, sulphide smell that lay along the ground so insistently. The mill was her life—all the rest of her

life. It was David—what was left to her of the man she had loved.

She would fight for it. Stiffly she set her chin on that thought.

The night men, not yet gone off shift, stared at her as she walked, eyes ahead, face grim and resolute, across the frozen yard.

XIX

THE men at the mill had worked all night, unloading the wrecked car, repairing the track, loading again. Disregarding the raw wind that blew through the valley, the occasional spit of snow, Branford Wills had worked with them, observing and listening, making himself as helpful and unobtrusive as possible. He did not deceive himself. Something was wrong at the mill. There was much shouting and rough talk, but there was also a secretiveness, a watchfulness. It appeared to Wills that among the older hands there was also an uneasy discomfort.

They were uncertain of each other. And a few had an air of insolence, a tendency to swagger. But Wills could not discover that any definite animosity was directed toward him. They were curt and one or two were a bit scornful of his ability in matters of strength or skill, but there were no covert sneers to be detected, no goading or insults. He was a tenderfoot and an outsider and they let him know it, but that was all.

It was growing day when he returned to his room at the Clark cottage to snatch a few hours of sleep. His legs were a trifle shaky, his throat felt raw, but he was grimly resolute. Some undercurrent was work-

ing in the Morgan mill and he intended to know what it was and what force impelled it. He had a double motive. He was indebted to Virgie and if he could solve this riddle of sabotage and put an end to it, it was little enough to do to repay that debt. And there was Marian.

Somehow he had to repair his blundering, make himself a man again in her eyes. He slept uneasily, wakened when the morning whistle blew.

Ada Clark's mother protested as he set out again, sheepskin collar shrugged high around his ears.

"You'll be down again and worse than ever if you don't take better care of yourself," she declared.

But he gave her a one-sided grin and tramped off, his two sandwiches in his coat pocket.

At the mill office he found Virgie already at her desk, with Lucy and Daniels standing about, their faces worried.

"Come along in," Virgie ordered as he opened the door. "You'll have to know about this. Seven men quit this morning."

"The Spains—and the two Andersons," Lucy added. "Billy Mount and his boy and Lucius." Her eyes were sorrowful and accusing. Her manner said louder than words, "This is your fault." Daniels was fiddling nervously with the bunch of keys in his fingers. For an instant Branford Wills got the impression that Daniels was evading, that there was something defensive in his manner, but he put that aside. They were all worried, Virgie most of all.

"That West Virginia stuff has to go through" she said. "We'll have to have somebody to tend the decker." For twenty years Billy Mount had tended the great machines, taken a fierce pride in the texture of the pulp that rolled through the presses.

"Could I do it?" Wills volunteered. "I have ordinary intelligence. I think I could do what Billy Mount could do."

"I need you outside," Virgie said. "With the Andersons gone we'll need somebody to get stuff in."

"But—why should those fellows quit?" Wills asked. "There's no other place for them in town. You treated them well—"

"They probably had reasons—fairly good reasons." Daniels was a trifle dry.

"Look here—if I'm in any way responsible for this—" Wills began vigorously, but Virgie waved a hand.

"Sit down—and keep your head on and your shirt-tail in! I'm responsible for this. Wallace Withers wants to buy this mill. Somehow or other he's working against me. How, I don't know yet. But I will know. It's a fight. Wallace says he'll put me out of business if I don't sell. Maybe he will—but he'll have a merry little time doing it. If you people want to stick with me—"

"Of course we'll stick," said Lucy eagerly.

"It might," Stanley Daniels suggested, "be possible to compromise."

Virgie blazed at him. "Compromise? Do I look like a woman who would compromise?"

"Business," Daniels defended, "is built on compromises. It has to be. Individualism cannot always survive."

"And so you think," Virgie cut back, "that I ought not to fight? That I ought to let Wallace Withers threaten to ruin me and never lift a hand? Is that what you think?"

"I think you are fighting a definite trend, Mrs. Morgan." Daniels grew a trifle oratorical. "You're living in an era which will see the death of the small business, of individual enterprise—personal control. There is an inevitability in it that you do not recognize. It may mean defeat for you and I think you are the sort of person who would suffer pretty badly in defeat."

"So you're thinking about my feelings, are you? Well, these are my feelings, in case any of you are in the dark. I had rather see the mill that David Morgan built destroyed—every brick, every wheel, every bolt in it—than to haggle with Wallace Withers—or surrender. If that's crazy, I'm crazy! Now, get to work, all of you! Lucy, get Champion on the wire and tell 'em I want seven hands for a few days. Decker men and outside hands. They've got part-time people always on hand they can spare. We won't grind today, we'll clean the mill. Come along, you boys."

She was fiercely executive all day. The atmosphere

of the mill, already tense, grew galvanic as she cracked the whip of her indomitable will. Lucy Fields went about breathing excitedly but Wills, helping old Frank Emmet to clean and oil the drum-barkers and the toothy cables that snaked the green wood in for grinding, kept a thoughtful watch.

Even granting that this man Withers, who coveted the mill had, somehow, been able to engineer the various calamities that had descended on the plant in the past few days, there remained to be discovered the means by which he had worked. Wills was not satisfied. He meant to do some sleuthing on his own.

He waited till the whistle blew at night and Lucy had put on her shabby green coat and gone out, then went to the office where Virgie sat studying a map on her desk. Outside murky lights burned in the yard and steam drifted down to lie in torn, cold wreaths along the ground.

Virgie looked up at him, and it appeared to Branford Wills that there was something deeper than weariness in her strong face. She looked a little stricken, as though something had been taken away from her that could not be returned.

She showed him the map. "This is what worries me," she said, "this land that belonged to Tom Prutt. This is what Withers is counting on—this timber acreage. He and Payne and those other fellows—the fellow Tom shot—have got a court order allowing them to cut timber enough to satisfy their claims. And you know what that means. The court can't go

up there and scale up stuff. They'll strip it and with what timber is standing there they can set up a mill and run it for three or four years. Long enough to worry me, anyway."

"And you're convinced that Withers is at the bottom of all your troubles?"

"What else can I think? He came to my house last night and made threats. Maybe they're just using him to handle local contracts and connections that outsiders couldn't put over. Mountain people are peculiar. They're suspicious of a stranger but a home-talent crook can do quite a lot with 'em. I reckon Wallace thinks he's in."

"Let me see that map again," Wills said. He had been a maker of maps, Virgie remembered. He anchored the colored sheet with an inkbottle and a slide rule and studied it.

"I filed an injunction to keep them off this morning," Virgie said. "Filed it for Tom, of course. It may not work. They may have the judge sewed up. Tom does what I tell him usually—but I don't always get there quite soon enough. I went over at daybreak—but I should have gone yesterday."

"They'd been there ahead of you? But surely he wouldn't listen to them?"

"I don't know. It's worrying me." She breathed wearily, like a spent runner. "They sent a lawyer to scare Tom, late yesterday. They told him that Cragg was filing suit against him for fifty thousand dollars' damages. Perhaps they can do it, in law—I haven't

looked into it. That's not the point. They gave Tom a good scare—and then they offered to settle. So he signed something—and he doesn't know what he signed."

"So everything you have done for him may be lost? Doesn't he understand that you're looking out for his interest?"

"You couldn't understand a mountain man, I'm afraid. Up to a certain point they'll listen. Beyond that—they're rampant individualists, as young Daniels says. Tom has always been a helpless old body—David looked after him. But no mountain man believes that a woman could know more than he does."

"Is there a blue-print of Pruitt's tract anywhere?"

"It's here in the safe. Do you want it?"

"I want it—and I want to see the land. Could I have a car and some one who knows the way to go over there to-morrow?"

"I'll send you a car—and a driver. What do you want to see it for? Even if I keep those men out of it, it will go back to Tom. I'll never timber it."

"I think," Wills said, "that I was once lost in that region. The outline on this map is somehow familiar. It gives me an idea. I'd rather not talk about it till I'm sure of it."

"Most young chaps," Virgie was dry, "want to talk first and do something about it afterward."

At home that night Virgie stretched her slippered feet to the fire and faced her daughter resolutely.

"I said you were going!" she stated grimly. "Who

else can I trust? This is more important than your silly personal prejudices."

Marian stood stormily, staring out a dark window.

"How do you know it is important? Because he says so! Oh, Mother—can't you see that all this Wallace Withers business is just a coincidence? Wallace Withers heard about the trouble in the mill and he thought it was a good time to jump in and try to bluff and scare you. The Spains and the Andersons and Billy didn't leave because of Wallace Withers—I'll never believe that. They didn't want to work under Wills and they resented his Sherlocking around the mill. You won't believe me—but Lucy thinks the same as I—and so does Stanley Daniels."

"So—you've all got your heads together and decided that I'm a senile old fool, eh?"

"Mother, I didn't say that. Please—"

"I don't ask much from you. Mighty little. I'm not asking now—I'm telling you. You'd better start at seven. Andrew will have the car ready."

Marian sighed. "I'm not trying to be tiresome, Mother. I want to help. If only you would see—"

"I've seen enough and heard enough. I'm tired. I've worked fourteen hours to-day and had trouble enough. To-morrow you'll drive the car over to Hazel Fork—and I want to hear no more about it."

Marian set her chin. "Did it ever occur to you, Mother, that I might have something to say about the management of the mill? I'm a stockholder. I own as much stock as you. My father left it to me."

"I suppose," drawled Virgie, scornfully, "you'd like to have all the pulp dyed lavender!"

"There's this about it, Mother. If Tom voted with me—you wouldn't be keeping Branford Wills on to ruin our mill!"

Virgie stood tall. Her face had turned stony and white as death.

"And I suppose if I don't run things to suit you, you'll sell the mill to Wallace Withers—you and Tom?"

"I really think I have some rights, Mother."

"You have. It will be a relief to me, too, if you'll exercise them. You might vote to discharge me and hire somebody else to get out pulp. That would be a help. I'm worn to the bone and I could use some rest. You could also figure out where the pay-rolls are coming from and how that car of chemicals, with bill of lading attached, is going to be unloaded and paid for. I'd like a day in bed—and I could go to the movies. I've only seen a couple of shows since David died. Maybe I'll join the Little Theatre. Could they use a fat old woman with a more or less bass voice and broken-down arches?"

"Mother—you know I never meant—"

"No—you didn't mean that kind of authority. None of you ever do—you young, brash things who want to run the world! You want to give orders in an arrogant tone—but when it comes to getting out in the frosty woods at five o'clock in the morning or up on a hot slope in the middle of May, when there's a

hundred acres of fire rolling down into your timber—no, you never mean things like that. You haven't linked up yet the old fundamental that along with authority goes a devilish lot of bone-grinding work. But maybe you're going to discard that, with all the rest of the old-fashioned fundamentals?"

Marian looked small and wan.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I'll go to-morrow. I'll be ready at seven. But—may I go to the Little Theatre meeting now?"

"Baby—" Virgie faltered. She was imperious no more. She was a tired woman, with whitening temples. "If I have to fight you, too—"

Marian gave a little, strangled sob. "I'm horrible," she choked, "to talk like that to you—"

They clasped each other tight. And over her child's shoulder Virgie looked up at the pictured face of David Morgan, and her deep courage returned.

XX

THE play was already being read when Stanley Daniels walked into the meeting of the Little Theatre group.

Lucy had begun it in her frail, sweet voice, but very promptly Marian Morgan had objected.

"Let Sally read, Lucy. We can't hear half that you say."

Lucy colored and stammered, smiling her nervous smile, handing over the book.

"I wouldn't be any good on the stage, would I?" She tried to laugh. "I try to make my voice bigger, but it just won't be. Begin that scene again, Mrs. Gallup."

Sally read dramatically, "'Muriel'—Muriel's the wife, isn't she? No, she's the polo player's wife. Where was I? Oh, yes—'Muriel: And what if I told you that I hated you, Boyd?'"

"You," Marian interrupted, "could do Muriel, Sally. Your voice suits that part."

"Where was I? 'Boyd lights a cigarette'—who'll be Boyd?"

"Maybe Bill would."

"He wouldn't. If we talked him into it, just about the time the show was ready to go on, a wire would

blow down or a turbine go wrong or something. Oh, here's Stanley. Hello, Stanley—listen to this part and see if you'd like to do it."

"But—there are several other plays," Lucy piped feebly. "They sent six on approval. You might like some of the others better."

"Go on, Sally," Marian prodded. "We'll never get through at this rate."

Lucy held her breath while Stanley Daniels took off his coat. She had maneuvered an empty chair and she glowed happily when he crossed the room and sat beside her.

"I don't like this play so much," she whispered. "I wish they'd read some of the others."

Sally's voice rose and fell dramatically. Lucy sank into a happy numbness. She was very tired, and she was unimportant to this group and knew it, and she did not greatly care so long as Daniels was near. She wondered if he would walk home with her, and nursed a jerk of panic for fear he wouldn't. They had so much to talk over—so much had happened at the mill—and here the small cold uncertainty that had tormented Lucy for days intruded again.

Had Daniels been a little odd at the mill—a trifle on the defensive? She hated harboring this uneasiness, but it would not down.

"I'm an awful fool!" Lucy scorned herself.

She made herself stop thinking about it, made herself stop looking at the backs of his hands, lean and slender and stained with chemicals. His cuffs were

very clean. He was always clean, close-shaven, jaunty. She tried to listen to the play, but it was stupid and too sophisticated for a village audience, she decided.

Sally read gaily on. "Oh, listen—I love this! Muriel says, 'Why do we seem always to fall in love with the wrong people? Why does love go blundering through the world, Greg? Nothing else blunders—not death nor trouble—they go straight to the mark—but love gets itself lost—finds itself in strange places where it was never meant to be.' I think that's a gorgeous line. Why don't we just decide on this play and send the others back?"

"It's so talky," Marian argued. "Muriel is a good part but that Pam—she's washy, I think. Nobody could make Pam appealing."

"You could. Especially in this scene with Greg."

"That weepy thing? You know I can't weep. And Pam is always surrendering. Maybe English women surrender so gracefully—but I couldn't. And we haven't any one to play Greg."

"Why not ask that new man? He's grand looking."

"He wouldn't be interested," Marian said, aloofly.

"You mean," Lucy was thinking, "you wouldn't be interested in having him."

The meeting ended at nine, after some squabbling, with no decision arrived at.

"I must go," Sally said. "Bill's playing pool—he always loses and he'll get bored and mad after an hour of it. And we have such a ghastly long way to go."

Lucy was nervous as she put the plays back into the envelop. Stanley Daniels helped her on with her coat, but he said nothing about walking home. Instead, he crossed the room and began talking to the others. Lucy's heart went down with a sick thump, though she made an effort at being gay as they all went down the stairs together. At the bottom she gave a little shiver and exclaimed, "Br-r-r! Cold. I'm glad I haven't far to go."

But Stanley Daniels had already hurried away, with a casual good night.

Lucy walked home rapidly along the dark little street. She had walked it all her life, she knew every bush, every post, every rut in the cinder path, windows were lighted and people up and about, but she quickened her walk into a run. But this was not from fear. It was not fear that made her snatch the front door open, throw her hat into a chair, and rush to her own room. She had to get there before misery overwhelmed her.

Her purse fell on the floor as she flung herself on the bed. Tears ran down and soaked the pillow, and her thin shoulders shook. Nothing was any use! He didn't care—and who could blame him? This awful house—her awful clothes—her colorless personality. Even her voice was pale and uninteresting. He was sick of her—she had flung herself at him—oh, she had! No use denying it. A ragged sob tore past her lips.

"What's the matter with you?" Her mother in her

faded outing nightgown and curlers was at the door.

Lucy burrowed deeper into the pillow.

"Nothing's the matter!" she wailed. "Everything's the matter! Go away! Oh, for heaven's sake, go away!"

Stanley Daniels walked rapidly. He was definitely worried. He had returned to his room at Mrs. Gill's, after the tense, upset day at the mill, to find a note on the hall table. Mrs. Gill drew his attention to it eagerly.

"He left it here about an hour ago. He said he'd come back. He said he wanted to see you about seven-thirty."

Daniels tore the cheap gray envelop open. A defensive, apprehensive anger made his face burn as he read the few lines.

"When he comes I won't be here. Tell him I had to go to a meeting. An important meeting."

"Maybe you better write a note," worried the landlady. "Maybe I'll get it wrong." She did not like offending people—not when she owed money on a note.

"No, I won't write any note. Just tell him that I had another engagement."

But as he hurried along the frozen street he had a feeling that things impended. It did not surprise him when he walked into his own room to find Wallace Withers sitting there in the one comfortable chair.

"Well, I waited, young feller," Wallace said. "I sent you word two or three times to come and see me,

but you didn't take the trouble—so I came to see you."

"So I see." Daniels strove for nonchalance. "I've been busy. I intended coming but—" he hung up his overcoat carefully. "Was there something you wanted to see me about?"

Wallace Withers squared himself and fixed his hands in a pontifical gesture.

"Things have happened—you might say all that development I was talking to you about is about to come to a climax. The men who are in with me are ready to take—definite steps. We figure we're ready for a little coöperation now from you." It was spoken pompously. Obviously, Daniels decided, the speech had been rehearsed.

Daniels' lips drew straight. His eyes moved away, grew guarded.

"And how am I supposed to coöperate?"

Wallace Withers liked an effect. He waited a moment, put on an expression of suave importance, spread his fingers on the backs of his hands.

"I am about ready to start some—extensive operations. Lumber—and pulp. From what I've heard from you I figured you might be ready to come along in with me. I expect to buy the Morgan mill. If Virgie holds out—and she's a hard-headed woman—we'll build a mill of our own, but I've got an idea that won't be necessary. And I'm counting on you."

Uncertainty, fear even, was cold in Stanley Daniels' veins, but he gave no sign.

"So—that's what you had in your mind? I wasn't impressed at first. I thought it was all—well, a lot of windy talk. But you had it all planned out."

Withers' lips folded and unfolded like the lips of a turtle.

"I don't waste time on windy talk," he said. "Not on young squirts like you. I talked to you because I had something for you to do—and you did it!"

Stanley Daniels sprang up. "I did nothing! I'm not in this. I'm not interested."

"Virgie," drawled the old man, "might figure different. And you better be interested. It means a future for you—or no future at all, you might say. I mean to go a long ways in this business—I've got money in back of me and I'm not going to do any two-penny job of it. If you want to come along—all right. If you don't—"

"Then what?" Daniels' face was stiff and colorless.

Wallace Withers grinned and it was not a pleasant grin.

"Way I look at it—if you don't come in with me, there won't be any place for you to go."

"She won't sell."

"She'll sell—or quit! Even if she don't sell—you won't have a job any more!"

"So—that's the racket! Either I go in with you—wreck what I'm doing—or you wreck me? That's a threat, is it?"

"I don't aim to use words like that. I'm just giving

you the best advice I know. And I'm making you a pretty good offer."

"An offer of what? A business that isn't established—a pipe-dream."

"You might find out it was a pretty strong pipe. You fellers," he waxed oratorical, "you young men think you know everything. That's your trouble. You don't give any man past forty credit for having any sense."

"I'll give you credit for plenty of sense—crook sense! I might have known what you were up to! You tricked me—got information out of me and now—"

"And now you're sort of squirming, ain't you, boy? Well, you needn't squirm. Not if you keep your head and look out for number one. I don't figure to talk—not to anybody. Of course, I could go to Virgie Morgan and tell her a mighty interestin' story. But that won't be needful, if you keep your head—and anyway, I look for Virgie to be ready to listen to reason by another week."

"Look here, if you think I'm going to—"

Withers ran his blunt, cruel-looking fingers through his hair.

"I'm not going to argue with you," he said. "And if you think you can make me mad, you ain't getting anywhere with it. It's been tried before. All you've got to do is quit your job by noon Saturday. Tell Virgie you've got a better offer—tell her anything you please—but you're going to quit."



"And what if I don't?" Daniels was defiant.

Withers shook down his too-short sleeves, picked up his hat.

"You will," he said dryly.

He tramped down the stairs and Stanley Daniels heard the door slam.

Daniels stood still for a long minute, lit a cigarette and let it go out, then snatched up his hat. The air of the room was suddenly stifling. He pounded down the stairs.

In the parlor, with the asparagus ferns, the everlasting rummy game went on. Three salesmen were playing, slapping down cards, laughing loudly. The fourth player was Branford Wills.

Daniels stared, swore, went out quickly. So—he was spying was he—the heel, the interloper! A surge of fury burned through Daniels' body, then chilled, leaving him with a weight of cold nausea at the pit of his stomach. He found himself thinking of Lucy. Of her gentle eyes and her mothering ways and her loyalty. Suddenly he felt young and lonely and afraid.

XXI

BRANFORD WILLS stared at the car that waited in front of the Clark gate.

"So—you came!" he said.

Marian Morgan snapped the gear in place.

"Yes, I came. But don't let your ego expand. I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for my mother."

He climbed in, pulling his hat down over his eyes.

"I want to see some timber formerly belonging to Tom Pruitt, on Hazel Fork," he said.

"I suppose you know," she kept her eyes away and her chin up, "that the roads are likely to be bad over that way? We may get stuck."

"I'll look over the area on foot. I have some corners to check."

"All part of the great mystery!" She was scornful.

They drove in silence.

Mountain men in clean shirts, bound for the village store, walked the roads, indifferent to the raw chill. Marian spoke to each, knew all their names.

"Do you know personally every man in this end of the state?" he asked.

"I was born here. Most of these people sell pulp wood to mother. When my father was buried four thousand people came to the funeral."

There was, Wills thought, something fine and

feudal and tremendous in that. Something that went back, as the traditions of these people went back, to the old countries none of them had ever seen, but which had stamped upon them, as the mark of all life is stamped upon the cell, the magnificent, aloof pride of tall Celts of the Wicklow and the Carrantual; of Highlanders from the shadow of Ben Nevis. Something of the old countries, in the way these men put their feet down, in the half bold, half feral glint in their eyes.

In Marian Morgan this defiant, separate thing was fined down to the cameo cut of her profile, the audacious tilt of her chin. The smoke of old peat fires was in the husk of her voice, there was something valiant about her that was like the ring of hunting bugles under Grampian cliffs, something of the resolute courage of men who had faced a new land from the ice-coated prows of sailing ships.

They passed the power lake and Wills remembered it. They stopped at the Gallup house.

Sally was reading the paper in pajamas. She opened the door only a chink.

"Heavens, you're early! Don't bring him in yet. Good gracious, Marian—I thought—"

"Don't think. I'm not bringing him in. I'm taking him across the ridge. Mother's orders. I want a bucket. Even as cold as it is, this car will heat on the grades."

"How heavenly—then you can sit back and look at all the pretty mountains while it cools."

"Don't be an utter idiot! Lend me a bucket. And we'll have to postpone the plays. I don't know the intent of this expedition, but mother thinks it's important."

"Marian, I don't own a bucket—only a terrible old huge thing Elvira uses to scrub. Could you use a stewpan?"

The road around the slope of the ridge was rutted and narrow, but from its twisting height Wills saw below him the tangled country through which on that last day he had stumbled, agonizingly, to Virgie Morgan's door. With a map-maker's eye he plotted the route, saw where he had turned off the high road, and beyond that the fire-scalded wilderness, grown head high with rhododendron and tangling vines, where through a night of sleet he had wandered.

He had drawn a dozen maps of this region, he had plotted it from aerial photographs, and every line of these was engraved on his mind. There were the tremendous summits to the north and west, there was this ridge, sloping southward and eastward, where Hazel Fork went splashing down to meet the river. It all had form, it fitted in with the thought that had entered his mind when he studied the little map in Virgie Morgan's desk. So many of the surveys had been haphazard, so much had been done that had to be done again.

"Stop here a minute," he said, "just here. I'll walk a little way." He unfolded the map again. He had

drawn it, sitting up most of the night, drawn it from sketchy bits in the note-book that remained in his pocket. All his material had gone on to Washington, but he felt that he had enough.

Slowly he walked, studying the terrain below. Above, on the narrow road, where first Virgie Morgan had seen the two men in the black car, Marian sat now, behind the wheel, looking small and lonely. For an hour, he scouted the crest, and the sun climbed higher. Icicles melted on the southern slopes and the faces of the crags began to drip. Down the gullies little streams ran clear, finding their way through a lacy network of ice. On a muddy bank, where he leaped across, was a deer track, lately made, clean-printed and plain.

He returned to the car and Marian sighed patiently, as she set the motor going again.

"Now where?"

"Can we get down under—down there where the big trees are?"

"We'll have to go far around. Some of it will be rough. But I know the way. I used to come in here with Tom."

She fell silent, as they followed the rough woods track, thinking of Tom. Just down there he must have hidden, those two days—and below, through the cathedral trees, ran the abandoned road where Cragg and the others had come in. A heavy pain bothered her when she thought that Tom probably would never see his beloved trees again. Never see

the hills again, perhaps—or the shabby old mill that he had loved—never hear again the crow's shrill defiance or the answering insolence of the mountain raven.

It was noon when they reached the lower slope of the ridge, and the sun had warmed and gilded the rocks with a false promise of spring.

"Look here, you must be starved," Wills exclaimed suddenly. "Is there any place near where we can get some sandwiches, or something?"

"Lossie made sandwiches. They're back here and there's some coffee."

"Saved! I was a chump not to think of it myself."

The coffee was not hot.

"Would the lady who owns the stewpan mind if we blacken the bottom of it?" Wills asked. "I can make a fire."

"Lossie can scour it."

If only things were different, Marian thought wistfully, what fun this would be! If only he were not so arrogant and so cold—if only she did not detest him. Wills built a small fire, expertly, between two up-ended racks. Then he thrust a stick into a crevice and hung a white handkerchief on it.

"Truce!" he announced. "The war is temporarily suspended while the combatants are fed."

"Only one cup," said Marian. "So—what do we do?"

"Pour your half back into the bottle. Then you drink from the cup and I imbibe from the stewpan."

"It's hot."

"In camps where I've dined we used empty bean cans. Gives a rich pork-and-catsup flavor to the brew."

A winter sparrow came and teetered on a sumac bough, making small inquiry as to whether any crumbs would remain. The sun lay ardently on the face of the rock and Marian held her palms to it, catching the warmth in cupped, pink fingers.

Her head was cocked like the bird's, her eyes were cool and remote. Wills looked at her and his heart gave a savage, hurting clutch. His spine straightened and a grim line hardened around his mouth. He was not defeated. Now she was as far from him as the moon—but when a man had caught a precious dream in his heart it was not easy to let it go. To-day she was the daughter of the Morgan mills—and he was an employee in corduroy pants. To-morrow—he clamped his teeth and flung a challenge to to-morrow. And suddenly he cleared his throat roughly.

Intolerable—to sit here in a forest silence with her disdain, with her eyes on him in cool indifference.

He flung the crust to the waiting sparrow, stood up.

"You needn't speak," he said, hoarsely. "I know how you feel—how you despise me. But I'm going to tell you this—if I never say another word to you as long as we live. I fell in love with you—the first time I ever saw you. I—haven't changed. I realize

who you are—and who I am—just a tramp that your mother rescued from a mountain thicket! I know what you've been thinking. It doesn't change. Nothing will change me—ever. And—I'm not giving up."

She stood up, slowly, let her eyes come up slowly. There was an odd little beating at the base of her throat, and for an instant her eyelids trembled mistily.

Then she gave a choky little sound.

"I'm going home," she said and turned and ran without looking back.

The car door slammed. The motor roared and she tore down the rutty track, jolting and bouncing for a hundred yards. Wills sat still on the rock, turning a cigarette slowly round and round in his fingers.

Then as suddenly as she had started, Marian stopped the car, backed it slowly.

"Get in," she ordered.

He gathered up the stewpan and the thermos bottle.

"Get in—and don't talk to me," she repeated, huskily keeping her eyes straight ahead.

Her profile was as unyielding as the line of the distant mountains. She was David Morgan's daughter—and she was finding it hard to surrender.

All the way back to the mill she kept her eyes grimly on the road. Wills sat silent, but his heart was leaping wildly, and a little smile twisted the corner of his mouth.

She was built, fine and gallant and loyal, as a silver sword. She was cut from a golden width of the fabric of dream. For a dream like that a man could wait a lifetime—joyfully!

Virgie went to the mill that Saturday morning, with her face set like the face on a monument.

She had argued with herself through long hours of darkness. Why was she being such a fool, being thrown into a tense panic by Wallace Withers? She could mill pulp and she could sell it; she had proved that. She could borrow money and pay it back. She could manage humble men and make important ones respect her. Even if Wallace bought up her notes, she could pay. She had kept her credit good. The mill would run on.

David would have laughed at Wallace Withers—or smiled his dry, one-sided smile, for David had seldom laughed. He had been intent and grave and fiery, like Marian. But he had fought an army of enemies and come through. His mill should run on.

Very high-headed, Virgie climbed the steps of her office. And there Lucy Fields looked at her with a tragic face.

"The West Virginia people have canceled," she said.

"What?"

"The West Virginia order—they canceled by wire this morning."

"But—their stuff is already milled! It's practically ready to go. What reason did they give?"

"None at all. It was a very short message. They canceled." Lucy was wan-faced. Her fingers were uncertain as she opened a tradepaper and indicated a paragraph. "I just saw this. Do you think it could have had anything to do with it?"

Virgie scanned the column. The paragraph Lucy pointed out, was headed, "MORGAN PEOPLE IN TROUBLE." The Morgan mills, so the type stated, were experiencing serious labor trouble, the outgrowth of a shooting affair on the property of the company. Mr. Gordon Cragg, prominent financier and timber magnate, so the story ran, had been shot and dangerously wounded by Thomas Pruitt, superintendent of the Morgan plant.

"Somebody ought to show this to Tom," Virgie commented, flatly. "I don't suppose anybody ever called him Thomas in his life."

"But we depended on that West Virginia order," Lucy worried. "They've never canceled before—I just looked through the files. They've been buying from us for eighteen years. We depend on that order for the tax money."

"I'll have to go up there, I suppose—and argue with them," Virgie said patiently. "Payne and Hooper and Withers, *et al.*, are getting in some fancy underground work."

"How can you go—with Tom's trial starting Monday?"

Virgie sat down. She was, she was discovering, an old woman. She could still take a blow, but the steel-

spring reaction of her indomitable spirit was lessening. She was tired and suddenly she was a little bitter. She thought of all the precious, cared-for women in the world; women whose men braced against the shocks and rough winds, women who were fended for, shielded—and who, many of them, gave so little in return. While other women, who worked and fought valiantly, for other people, to keep bread in the mouths of children and roofs and firesides for men and women who were old, women who asked for little besides peace were denied even that.

"It's a pretty darned rotten world!" she said, sharply aloud.

Lucy agreed, promptly. Through a sleepless night, she had herself been thinking how thoroughly rotten a world could be for women—for the pale and patient ones, at least, who had no allure, no magic, nothing but virtue and loyalty, nothing but a seemingly endless ability to absorb disappointments and slights.

"If I were any good," she sighed, "I could go. But—I wouldn't be any good, Mrs. Morgan. We'll have to put a man on the road, I suppose. All the others do. We've just depended on the same orders coming in, year after year—but now—"

"Young Daniels will have to go." Virgie sat erect again. At least here was something that could be done. Something definite and on the offensive. "Go get him, Lucy."

While Lucy was gone across the yard, Virgie

thumbed the mail over swiftly, scarcely seeing the type that her eye ran over. On Monday Tom would go on trial before a jury. She had hired good counsel—but the case looked hopeless before it began. Tom would defeat whatever they tried to do for him, by his stubborn bluntness. The lawyer for the plaintiff would not have to convict the old man—Tom would do that for himself. Not that she defended or justified Tom. To shoot a man down deliberately was not easy to excuse. They had planned an insanity defense but it was possible that Tom would ruin that. The best they could hope for, the lawyers had warned her, was a short sentence on account of Tom's age.

"And any sentence will kill him—so it would be kinder to hang him and be done with it," she had answered that.

What troubled her most was her own ineffectiveness. She had been fiercely boastful, she had defied the world, as the Irish are so prone to do; she had talked widely and magnificently about saving Tom—of saving the mill and being undismayed by Wallace Withers, and now every recurring blow left her more helpless, more inarticulate, futile, pathetic.

It was a sickening spectacle for a proud woman to contemplate. It was worse for an honest woman who could not bring herself to stoop to alibis. Up to now, she had been able to do nothing to stem this tide of disaster. Somehow, of course, Payne and Hooper and Wallace Withers were behind this newest catas-

trophe. She gave Wallace credit—he was overlooking nothing.

Lucy came back, followed by Stanley Daniels.

Virgie regarded her chemist, her mouth drawn severely straight.

"For a working man," she said, "you're very elegant, this morning!"

Daniels wore his good clothes, a clean shirt, a jaunty tie. He was a trifle pale, but he faced her coolly.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Morgan," he said. "But—I'm not working to-day. I was checking over the laboratory. I am resigning my position with you—to-day!"

Virgie let the old octagonal clock tick off a measured minute, while she looked him up and down. Lucy stood like a statue, white as death, motionless, hardly breathing.

"So—they got you, too, did they?" Virgie said, presently.

Daniels flushed, then the blood drained out of his face.

"My—decision has not been influenced by any one," he said, stiffly. "I have felt—for some time—that I did not have your confidence, Mrs. Morgan. Chemistry is a responsibility—a serious responsibility. I—feel that I don't wish to assume that responsibility any longer in a plant where I'm not—trusted."

"Who distrusts you?" Virgie countered, her eyes as frigid as his.

He was manifestly uncomfortable. Lucy drew a little strangling breath, her hands at her throat.

"You—were very plainly suspicious of me, Mrs. Morgan—when we lost that pulp. And your attitude yesterday—and before that—"

"How much," Virgie cut in, "did Wallace Withers pay you to make that speech?"

Daniels glared, affrontedly.

"I have not been paid—certainly not by Mr. Withers!"

Virgie reached for the telephone. "Call Julia Gill for me, Mildred," she said into it evenly. "Julia? This is Virgie Morgan. Was Wallace Withers in town last night? Oh, he came there to see Mr. Daniels, did he? Much obliged. No—that's all." She hung up.

Stanley Daniels' eyes were blazing.

"I—think I have a right to—my own affairs," he said, "on my own time—without being spied on—or catechized!"

"All the right in the world." Virgie's tone was wooden. "The right to cheat and do sabotage—and destroy the people who have depended on you! The right to disappoint people who look for something decent and square in this younger generation."

"I haven't cheated! I didn't touch that pulp—oh, what's the use? You wouldn't believe me anyway!"

"No," Virgie was patient, "probably I wouldn't. I'm just a stupid old woman. I believe what I see—and what I hear. I see you deserting me—and I hear

that you've been in communication with the man who brags that he's going to ruin me. I add up two and two in my naïve, outmoded way—and I get a plain answer. Now—I'll tell you something, Daniels. I did suspect you—at first. I overcame it—because I want to believe in young people. I called you in here just now to send you off on an errand of importance to me—because I hoped you'd do it well—because I thought you'd be glad of the chance to prove yourself to me. But—all that's ended. Talk is no use. You can check out. Take the inventory over, Lucy—and check him out."

"You'd better check carefully," Daniels flared. "Probably I've been stealing from you, too!"

"The person you've been stealing from," said Virgie, with a heavy patience, "is yourself!"

"Oh, please—I can't!" faltered Lucy.

"I said—go over and check him out," repeated Virgie, evenly, "and remember—all the tragedies aren't played in the Little Theatre!"

At the laboratory door, Lucy turned on Daniels a livid face.

"How can you do a thing like this—to her?"

He flushed angrily. "What chance did I have? I could have explained—but she wouldn't have listened. You heard her give me the third degree—telephoning Mrs. Gill."

"You could have explained what? What was there to explain?"



"I could have explained why Withers was there. He—framed me. He would have ruined me. He led me on to talk—he got information out of me—formulas—"

"You told him what to put in a digester to ruin a batch of pulp!" Lucy was all white scorn. "You were just talking—to be interesting—because he made you think you were important. And then when he took the information he got from you—and hired those low-down Spain boys to do the work, probably—"

"How do you know?"

"I don't know. But—it adds up, doesn't it? And then he threatened you—I think you're *cheap!*" she blazed at him. "I think you're—*yellow!* And—I was in love with you! I—suffered because you didn't care! It—makes me sick now when I think about it."

He flung the door back. The flat, acrid chemical smell rushed at them. This had been his world—the place where he had ruled men and processes, by the power of his moving thumbs over a test-tube, by the might of figures written on ruled sheets, by his word. For years he had been supreme, a person of importance, knowing things other men did not know. But now he was only a lost young man stumbling into a reeking cubicle—a young man out of work.

"Hadn't you better get at that inventory?" he said, flatly, racking up test-tubes. "I'm leaving town. I don't intend sticking around here forever."

But Lucy did not stir. She stood, with the flat book under her arm, her eyes purple-black and thunderous.

"You're not going!" she slashed. "You're not going through with this. You're going to stick here—and be—something—a man!"

"Sorry—I'm going."

She held the latch of the door. She was vibrant all over, like a small gray hornet.

"You're not going! There's the mill! I—despise you! When I think what a fool I've been—*crying*—over you—I never want to see you again. But—there's the mill. It has to go on. It *has* to go on. And we can't run without sulphides and magnesium and the right formulas. You're not going—because I'm going to lock you in!"

Daniels jumped too late.

She had swung with the heavy door, crashed it shut, and he heard the heavy padlock he had himself put on, clack fast on the outside.

"You're not going, Stanley Daniels," she shrilled at him through the panels. "You can sit in there and make up your mind to that! You can make up your mind to—be a man! You're going to stay in there—till I get good and ready to let you out!"

He dragged at the door, beat unavailingly on the heavy panels. He swore at her.

"You crazy little fool!" he shouted. "You crazy devil!"

But she was gone. He kicked the panels in wrath, but the effort was wasted and he knew it.

Heavily he sank on the greasy stool, watched an upset bottle of acid trickle slowly to the floor.

Who would have thought that quiet, mousy little thing had so much fire in her? His anger relaxed a little. He had been sick, shaken and miserable with a mixture of shame and dread all night. Toward dawn he had decided that the only thing to do was to leave town.

But now his neck stiffened a little, his jaw set. So—she thought he was yellow, did she—the spunky little devil? He'd show her—he went to the door and gave it a resounding kick.

"Frank!" he shouted, "let me out of here!"

Far down the plant he could hear the hose running as men scoured out the blow pits. But no one came near, no one answered his calls.

In an hour the men would be gone and the mill would be silent until Monday, except for the desultory prowling of old Frankie Emmet. She would come back, of course—she had carried away the keys.

But the winter sun moved across the stack house and cut a black shadow over the concrete wall, and Lucy did not come back.



XXII

THE lawyer who came at noon, with Wallace Withers, was a suave stranger.

He was, so he stated, from Baltimore. He represented the Messrs. Payne, Cragg, and Hooper.

"And Withers," added Virgie.

"I do not represent Mr. Withers. I am not connected with the local enterprises of my clients, Mrs. Morgan. I am retained to prosecute a suit for damages for Mr. Cragg against your—superintendent, I believe—Mr. Thomas Pruitt."

"You didn't overlook anything, did you?" drawled Virgie.

"It is the function of an efficient attorney to overlook nothing. Very wisely, we think, Mr. Pruitt accepted our advice—which was to settle out of court. With more serious action pending it would be unfortunate for him to be involved also in civil matters, to which he could not give his attention. So he decided to make suitable settlement with my client, Mr. Cragg, and I have here"—he unfolded a paper—"an order upon you, Mrs. Morgan, to deliver to me fifty shares of stock in the Morgan mills—the property of Mr. Pruitt."

Virgie sprang up.

"It's a trick! Tom wouldn't sign away his stock in the mill. He didn't know what he was signing. He told me so. You tricked him—a helpless old man—in prison!"

"I assure you, Mrs. Morgan, that every document was carefully read to Mr. Pruitt."

"What of it? He wouldn't understand. He was scared and numb—you can scare Tom to death with a legal paper. You tricked him! He would have killed all of you before he'd give up his stock in this mill!"

"I can believe that. Mr. Pruitt's mania for homicide must be embarrassing to you. But—we do not trick people, Mrs. Morgan. We find it unnecessary." The oily voice ran like horrid fingers over her. "So, if you will read this order, please? You will notice that you are directed by Mr. Pruitt, as the custodian of his stocks and property, to deliver to me fifty shares of Morgan mill stock, to the amount of fifty thousand dollars par value—"

"I won't deliver it. I'll fight you through every court in this country first!"

"Of course, you understand that that attitude is quite futile. We can compel you to deliver the stock, Mrs. Morgan. We can bring an officer here with a writ—"

"Bring a dozen officers—if you can find one who'll serve a writ against me!"

"You exaggerate your importance and your in-

vulnerability, I fear. The stock will be taken to Mr. Pruitt for signature of transfer—”

“Transfer to whom?”

“Mr. Withers has contracted to purchase it, I understand.”

“I thought so.”

“Look here, Virgie, you’re wasting your breath,” Wallace put in. “This is all settled. You can’t do a thing about it.”

“I’ll see about that.”

“I reckon we’ll have to fetch a constable.” Wallace mustered pious patience with an obdurate woman. “She’s hard-headed. Talk won’t be any use. She keeps it in that safe—”

“How do you know where I keep it?” Virgie flashed at him. “I suppose you’ve got some more spies on my pay-roll? Your Mr. Daniels has done pretty well. I suppose you set those fires yourself?”

“You are being very unreasonable, Mrs. Morgan,” soothed the lawyer. “We are being very lenient with Mr. Pruitt. My client has been permanently injured without justification or excuse—”

“You might as well hush,” declared Withers patiently. “Come along and we’ll fetch somebody she will listen to.”

The door banged behind them. Virgie stood still in the middle of the room, still shaking with white rage.

“The thieves!” she muttered.

Tom’s stock in the mill! Blood of his blood—a

piece of his heart! A part of what David had built—the mill that Tom had loved, for which he had given his life! And Wallace Withers would own it. She knew Wallace. The camel's nostril would be inside the tent. In a year he would harass, torment, eventually destroy her—wrest from her control of the property. Poor Tom—to have wished to do so well for her—and in his blundering, misguided zeal, to have done so ill!

They would be back presently, with some country constable, who would turn red when she looked at him, but who would drag from an unsavory pocket a paper with the seal of a magistrate upon it, and compel her to open the safe.

A sudden thought came to her. Swiftly she bent and twirled the combination of the safe. The heavy door moved open slowly, and she flung it back and unlocked the inner compartment. Flat, taped bundles of paper slid out into her hand. She sat on the floor, turning them over rapidly. All the papers on the Hazel Fork property—she knew those well, she had had them out the day before with Wills. Her own stock in the mill tied in an envelop—she counted the shares. All there. But—that was all!

Twice she turned over the entire contents of the compartment. Then in a panic flurry she pulled everything out—old ledgers, old bills, contracts, and leases. Papers that David had filed, papers she herself had put carefully away; tax receipts, deeds to timber lands, insurance policies, she unfolded each,

shook it, opened and shook every book, searched frantically.

Tom's stock—and Marian's—was gone!

But—how—who—

No one but Lucy knew the combination. Lucy and Tom. And Tom was locked in jail.

She was still sitting there, shaking out papers, staring at the empty spaces in the safe when the door opened. She started, then saw that it was Marian who stood there.

"Mother! What has happened?" Marian exclaimed.

Virgie tied a tape with cold fingers.

"We've been robbed," she said. "A lawyer came—Wallace was with him. They tricked Tom into signing away his stock last night. They're coming back with an officer to make me give it up. And—it isn't here! It's gone. And your stock—the stock your father left for you—is gone, too!"

Marian closed the door, slid the bolt.

"Mother—get up—and sit down here. You're white as a sheet. You're shaking all over."

"I can't sit down. They'll be here any minute. They won't believe me. Some fool took it, I suppose—some of the sneaks who've been working for Wallace. It couldn't be Lucy—"

"Oh, no—not Lucy—"

"She knows enough to know that the stock's useless until it's signed over. But—nobody else knew the combination."

"Tom knew it. And—I know it."

"You?"

"Tom wrote it down for me. Mother—sit here and let me bring you some cold water. The stock isn't gone, Mother. It's safe. I took it."

Virgie sank limply into the old chair that had been David's.

"You took it?"

"I took it over to the court-house. To be registered. Tom signed it over to me—a week ago. It's mine. He couldn't give it to any one else—because he has already signed it over to me. He was going to leave it to me—in his will. He told me so. And I saw the will. He left it here with Lucy that day—when he went up to Hazel Fork. Tom wanted me to have it. So—the last time I went to the jail, he was worrying about it. And—I wanted that stock, Mother—I'm ashamed to tell you why I wanted it. I wanted to control the mill. I wanted to make you fire Branford Wills—and now—I'm ashamed! But—the stock is safe. They can't touch it."

Virgie's hands fell limply. "Pick up that mess," she muttered, sagging back in her chair. "I give up."

"Here—drink this—"

"I'm all right. It's just—too much has been happening behind my back. Even you—"

"I told you I was ashamed. But anyway, we saved Tom's stock. Maybe we can beat them yet."

Virgie looked numbly at her child. David's child—with her finely cut profile, her dark eyes and resolute

mouth. Gallant and splendid—and imdomitable. Like David.

"So—you own the mill!" she said.

"Are you angry, Mother?"

"I don't know. It was a shrewd thing to do. Your father would have thought of it. I—seem not to think of things—soon enough."

"You're wonderful, Mother. I don't want to run the mill. I couldn't. I'm not wise enough or strong enough."

"I seem not to be wise, either. Lock the safe, Baby—those men will be back."

"They're coming now. It looks like an army."

No one noticed Lucy, coming in at the back door, because so many people were entering by the front way.

Lucy's eyes were blazing and a little wild. Her chin had a dogged angle, and scarlet coins burned in her cheeks. She looked younger, lighter, aglow with a sort of fantastic triumph, almost defiant. She pulled out her chair, then waited as the odd procession filed in.

"Mr. Payne," the lawyer introduced the newcomers, "and Mr. Hooper. And this officer, I suppose, you know?"

The shambling constable, looking awkward and on fire with curiosity jerked at his hat and said, "Howdy, Mis' Morgan."

"Hello, Ed," greeted Virgie. "You travel in poor company."

"This here is somethin' I got to do," fumbled Ed. "I ain't so set on it—but you know how things is—"

"Go ahead," ordered Virgie, curtly.

Ed rummaged out his paper. Wallace Withers pulled out his heavy old watch and ran his thumb over the crystal, thudded it back again. Lucy's eyes were big and anxious. Only Marian stood calm, smiling a one-sided smile.

"I got an order here," began Ed, "for some stock—belongs to Tom Pruitt—"

"Go on and serve the paper," snapped Withers, "I got to get home. It's most time to milk."

"Don't bother, Ed," Virgie said, "I know what's in that paper. It won't do you any good to read it to me. These gentlemen—and their attorney—are very astute. They know exactly what they are doing. You investigated the ownership of this stock, I suppose, gentlemen?"

"Certainly!" snapped the man Payne.

"You're just stalling, Virgie—and it won't do you a bit of good."

"I'm not trying to do myself any good, Wallace. I'm doing you good. You got that order by fraud—and I can prove it. That might not sound so well in court—"

"We got it square—Pruitt knew what he was doing. He knew he was signing away his stock—he had to save himself."

"Sounds funny," Virgie's voice drawled. "I've known Tom a long time. He was a shrewd old moun-

tain man. He knew what he was doing most of the time—except when he lost his head because he was being robbed. It's hard to believe he'd sign an order to deliver that stock to you—yesterday, that was?—when he had already transferred it—a week ago!"

"I don't believe it!" barked Withers.

"The transfer is recorded. You can see the record at the court-house. That will be about all to-day, gentlemen—" Virgie drew herself up superbly.

"No—not quite all," said a quiet voice from the door.

Branford Wills stood there, lean and calm and tall, a folded paper in his hand.

"Mr. Payne, I assume?" he said. "And Mr. Hooper? I have just come from Hazel Fork, gentlemen—"

The lawyer interrupted. "This is another matter, sir. We do not know you."

"I am employed by Mrs. Morgan. My name is Wills—formerly with the National Park Commission. I have been investigating the area on Hazel Fork—upon which I understand you gentlemen, all of you, intend beginning some extensive operations in lumber and pulp wood?"

"What's your business?" demanded Withers. "If you've been interferin' up there, Virgie Morgan—"

"Mrs. Morgan has not been interfering," Wills said. "Mrs. Morgan knows nothing about this. I happen to be a government cartographer, formerly,

as I have said, with the Park Commission. I made the road maps for that area. There has been, evidently, some confusion and delay in surveys and condemnation suits—owing to the confused condition of the title to the land—a condition you gentlemen were very quick to take advantage of, but—I would not advise you to begin timbering operations on that land, gentlemen—now or ever!”

“You’re very smart, young fellow,” snapped the man Hooper, “but I happen to have a court order that allows me to timber that area to satisfy my claims and those of my associates. Do you think I’d be fool enough to invest money in a proposition like that if I didn’t know what I was doing?”

“Unfortunately,” Wills smiled a slow, dry smile, “I do not know what sort of a fool you are, Mr. Hooper, I am merely advising you for your own good. I have sent to Washington for plats and surveys for confirmation of what I know to be the truth—they should arrive by Monday. But—I happen to know that I am right. I went over the land to-day to be sure. I do not think you will cut any timber on the land formerly belonging to Tom Pruitt.”

“What are you crashing in here for, anyway?” demanded Wallace Withers, angrily. “And what are you getting at, anyhow?”

“I’m advising you not to cut timber on Hazel Fork, Mr. Withers—you nor any one else. Of course, I can’t prevent you—but I can bring it to the atten-

tion of people who can prevent you— That land up there, gentlemen, belongs to the people of the United States.”

“You’re a meddling young fool!” stormed Withers. “What do you know about it?”

“Perhaps,” suggested the lawyer uneasily, “it might be well to look into this matter, gentlemen.”

“We’ll look into it. And we’ll look into that stock transaction, too. It has a fishy sound to me.”

“By all means investigate thoroughly. You’ll find—as I found, gentlemen—that that area of land up there is included in the boundaries of the National Park. Probably the condemnation suits to establish ownership are lost somewhere in the maze of other lawsuits and claims that have been filed on the property. But I wouldn’t advise you to cut any timber there till you have satisfied yourself where the boundary lies. It’s easy to take timber away from old men—and to rob women—but don’t try it on the Government of the United States, gentlemen. That will be all. Good afternoon.”

Lucy let her breath out slowly as the procession filed out the door.

“It’s like the movies!” she gasped.

Wills was standing still, tall and lean and purposeful, in the middle of the room.

“There are some things to be settled,” he said. “We may as well finish it. Withers planned all this sabotage to force you to sell. But he had help. Men

inside the mill. Brains inside the mill. He had Mr. Stanley Daniels."

"No!" The choky cry came from Lucy. "No—it isn't true."

"I'm sorry—it's true. I've been doing some investigating, Mrs. Morgan."

"They framed him," wailed Lucy. "Old Wallace Withers asked him—Stanley, I mean—if there was any chemical that would destroy pulp and Stanley told him. And then the pulp was ruined—and Wallace Withers threatened to tell Mrs. Morgan that Stanley did it unless he gave up his job."

"Why doesn't he come here to speak for himself, if that's true?" Wills asked.

"Because," said Lucy faintly, "I've got him—locked up. He was going to leave. He didn't do it. He was a fool—but he isn't crooked. I locked him up. Shall I let him out, Mrs. Morgan?"

Virgie's smile crinkled her face and she burst into a sudden laugh.

"No—don't let him out, Lucy. Keep him there till he realizes what a grand girl you are. Keep him there till he melts."

Lucy smiled and it was as though a candle had been lighted behind her eyes.

"I think he's—melting, Mrs. Morgan!"

"It's raining," Marian said suddenly aloud. "Rain and sleet. I'd better take you home, Mother—it's going to be a dreadful night."

And then the telephone rang. Marian answered it, said, "Mother!" faintly, handed the instrument to Virgie, the color draining out of her face.

Virgie barked, "What did you say, how? Who came there? You say he took your gun?"

She hung up slowly, sitting rigid and aghast.

"Tom has escaped!"

"When? How? How could he?"

"Lon says he got away thirty minutes ago. They don't know how. He took Lon's gun."

"But—he'll freeze—on a night like this! We'll have to find him, Mother—"

"Yes—we'll have to find him." Virgie looked at Wills. "Lon says that Wallace Withers was over there to-day. Tom has found out who it is that has been plotting to ruin us. He's a mountain man—"

"We'll go," Wills said. "They'll look for him, of course?"

"Lon said he was sending some of the boys out. They won't know where to go. I know where Tom will go." Virgie's face was heavy with trouble as she twisted into her heavy coat.

"I'm going, too," Marian said abruptly.

"It's going to be an ugly night," Virgie objected. "You'd better go home before it freezes."

"Mother—I'm going. Tell Frank to put the chains on."

"Wrap yourself up then. Lucy, you stay here by the 'phone. If Lon calls tell him we're out on a hunt—if we find Tom we'll bring him in."

Wills drove and Marian huddled in the middle of the single seat of Virgie's old car. Freezing rain spatted on the roof, coated the wind-shield. The light failed with the swift completeness of mountain night. Wills got out to scrub the wind-shield clean. The wheels slewed on the curves in spite of the chains and Virgie's profile, against the dim light, was granite and grim.

"Drive on," she said. "I'll tell you when to turn."

"He wouldn't take the road, Mother," Marian worried. "And even if we met him we couldn't see him."

"Drive on," said Virgie, flatly.

They passed a looming mill and a curve where a waterfall came down, roaring and splashing under a high bridge.

"Left—at the next road," said Virgie.

"Mother—" an edge of panic was in Marian's voice. "You don't think—"

"I know!" said Virgie, soberly. "They were over there—Wallace and the others. Tom didn't know before who was working against us—but now he knows. Take it slow, Wills—this road is dirt and it'll be slippery."

"It's freezing a little. The chains hold. I can go faster if it won't make you nervous."

Marian huddled, small and frightened, under Branford Wills's elbow, her head in a snug béret, scarcely reaching his shoulder. Once he looked around and gave her a scrap of smile, in the dim

light from the dash, but she was looking solemnly and searchingly ahead.

"How awful—to be wandering around in the hills on a night like this!" she said. "Poor old Tom!"

"I know how awful it can be," Wills agreed. "I had two nights of it. There's so much sky and black air and empty wind and savage dark around you—and you feel a sort of hatred in it—as though it would kill you if it could. And the branches reach out and snatch and almost snarl—and boulders and roots trip you up—and the wind gathers up handfuls of ice and flings them in your face."

"And you were lost!" said Marian in a small, frail voice.

He looked down at her. "I'm still lost," he said, levelly.

Virgie cleared her throat. "I'm here," she reminded them, "but I'm old and my hearing isn't what it used to be."

"Tom wouldn't be lost." Marian essayed the commonplace again. "He knows his way anywhere in these mountains—no matter how dark it might be."

Too well—too well, Virgie was thinking. Old and a little mad, and frenzied with the thought that men were working to do her wrong—oh, she knew. Little by little news had come back to old Tom of the evil doings at the mill. The mountain grapevine was swift, it belittled nothing. And to-day these men had

come, quarreling about his mill stock—the stock he had believed to be safe, which his simple mountain mind would believe now to be menaced.

The river was alongside now, dark and noisy and hidden by the whirling dash of sleety rain. Trees hung low, and the darkness grew thicker; it brooded and was hostile and fearsome. Marian clutched a sleeve and laid her face against it. Wind shook the old car fiercely, but the wheels dug and spun and plowed on. Once a frightened rabbit leaped through the darting steel rods of the rain, its eyes green and terrified. Ice was glassy on the hood, the wind-shield wiper gouged a feeble arc and then failed.

"I'll have to scour it off," Wills said. "We might hit something."

Air that cut their faces rushed in as he opened the door. Marian thought of old Tom—the thin, torn old coat he had worn in the jail, his feet sloshing through the freezing mud, wind cutting through mercilessly.

"Oh—hurry!" she whispered. "But—Mother, what if he didn't come this way?"

"He came this way. He took the old log trail across the ridge, and crossed the river on that swinging bridge."

"There's a light," said Branford Wills.

"The gate is beyond that big tree. It's steep beyond—you'd better change gears."

"Has he had time—"

"He left before dark. A boy saw him go. They didn't miss him till supper time—"

"If only they had locked the door," Marian mourned.

"We may be in time." Virgie was hopeful.

The house that sprang out of a gnarled darkness of old apple-trees was bleak and somber and somehow desolate.

"The door's open—" breathed Marian.

Virgie gave a little groan.

"I'll go," she said. "You wait here."

"Not alone, Mother."

"No—not alone," Wills sprang out after her.

Marian hurried after them, slipping and panting, in the wan beam of their headlights. But somehow she knew it was too late. She had known it when the dreary old house leaped out of the darkness, out of the solitude and silence which for a year it had known.

"Don't let her come," Virgie warned sharply.

"But I'm coming," Marian answered, setting the chin she had from David Morgan.

"Take my hand," Wills said.

"I can walk alone." But she took the hand.

Held it tight, clutched by the dread of that sinister, opened door. Beyond that door a lamp fluttered in the draft. Beyond it was a deserted room, where coals glowed in a base burner and Wallace Withers' elastic-sided shoes sat warming on the floor. Shoes he would never wear any more.

"Don't come closer," Virgie called sharply.

But Wills went on and Marian would not let go his hand, though her flesh was icy and her hair lifted a little on her head, at what lay there, face upward in front of that open door.

Wallace Withers had been shot cleanly through the head.

This time Tom's gun had not jammed.

"Don't touch anything," Wills warned. "Is there a telephone in this house?"

Virgie, a little sick because she could not hate even a dead, cruel old man who had wronged her, shook her head.

"Not even a well," she said.

"But—we've got to find Tom!" Marian began sobbing wildly.

"Take care of her," Virgie said to Wills wearily. "I'll get a sheet. I know where they are. I can't leave him lying there—like that."

She had heard Marian's little choking cry, "Oh, Bran—Bran—"

She had seen Wills holding her in his arms. Suddenly she was old and lonely, and this was death lying face up to the hostile sky—and out of the aloof hills a winter wind howled in desolation. Suddenly she was sorry for Wallace Withers. He had been lonely, too!

They found Tom Pruitt at dawn. Men with lanterns and dogs had crashed and slid through the icy night, cursing the storm and the darkness. And all

night Virgie had sat by the stove in Wallace Withers' house, looking straight ahead of her, musing on the tangled tragedy of life—and the way greed snarled the twisting strands, wove traps and nooses and webs for hopes and high ambitions to be choked in.

Wills and Marian had gone for help and met a posse on the road. But light was under the hemlocks along the river bluff when they found Tom.

Virgie saw them coming, slowly, up the frozen lane, and knew what they had found.

"He went over them rocks—down there where the river runs under the cliff," a deputy said. "He was heading back toward your place I reckon, Mis' Morgan, and he missed his footing in the dark. I wouldn't take on, Mis' Morgan—I reckon it's just as well."

"Yes," said Virgie, tonelessly, "it's just as well." Somehow she got home.

Riding in somebody's rickety car, cold and weary and aching from head to foot with a sorrow that was rigid and steely like bonds around her heart and throat.

The mountains and the woods were frigidly incased in a coating of icy glass. The streams were hidden and from the stack of the mill a wan steam drifted.

The fires were banked and to-morrow the barkers would whirl again, gnashing their steel teeth into unresisting wood, grinding and spewing and sucking

away the life-blood of a green tree so that missals could be printed for praying nuns and letters written to old mothers.

The mill would go on.

The mill would go on and Tom would not be there. David would not be there. A sudden, stark, awful loneliness got Virgie Morgan by the throat as she walked into her own house, and sank into the chair that had the print of David Morgan's thin shoulder-blades.

She couldn't go on—she couldn't—alone!

And then suddenly she was not alone. Youth was there, with lights and hot coffee and gentle hands.

Marian and Branford Wills. "We've stopped fighting, Mother—we found out we were terribly in love with each other. Do you mind, Mother? Take off her shoes, Bran, and rub her feet. I'll get her slippers."

Branford Wills knelt at her feet, lean and brown, with his deep voice and gentle eyes.

"I can't go on without her," he said. "I know what a presumptuous fool I am—"

"I'm glad," said Virgie numbly. She would have liked a son like this lad, she was thinking.

Lucy was there—and Stanley Daniels, looking sheepish and relieved and eager to help. They were scrambling eggs, they announced.

"We thought you'd need us, Mrs. Morgan," Lucy said, brightly, little red coins shining in her cheeks.

Suddenly Virgie began to sob.

They were so brave and so reckless and so gallant. Their eyes were so clear. They were youth—going on!

“Yes, I need you!” she said hoarsely.

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